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FIRST AND LAST.

FIRST AND LAST.

A Novel.

BY F. VERNON WHITE.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL I.



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FIRST AND LAST.

CHAPTER I.

‘LOVE’S YOUNG DREAM.’

‘COMPARATIVELY young in years, but a veteran in political warfare.’ Such was the description of the Right Honourable Hugh Childerton Hammersley, Baron Carnmore, as given by those who had watched his brilliant and somewhat romantic career.

On the death of his father, Colonel Hammersley, a man of fashion and a great spendthrift, Hugh found himself the possessor of a remarkably handsome person, eight

hundred a year (the remnant of what had been as many thousands), and with three tolerably healthy lives between himself and a coronet. He was ambitious and talented ; and ambition and talent are seldom contented with a moderate competence. It clearly therefore became the question, into what field he should direct his energies for the purposes of acquiring fame and increasing his fortune. This problem presented itself just about the time when the agitation for the repeal of the Corn Laws was commencing, and his natural aptitude for politics offered an easy solution. From the age of fifteen every book or pamphlet of a political tendency that fell in his way was devoured with avidity, till, in two or three years, he had become a perfect encyclopædia of legislative wisdom, and able to reduce most of the guests at his father's table —men, it must be confessed, not as a rule remarkable for their intellect or powers of disputation—to silence, if not to conviction. His proclivities were painfully Radical, embracing many of those new and startling doctrines which had found their way from France, to

raise doubt and distrust in the ordinarily sober minds of Englishmen.

Had it not been for this unfortunate tendency, his powerful connections, both on the father’s and mother’s side, might have advanced his fortunes considerably ; but it was not to be expected that men who prided themselves on the purity of their descent and the extent of their acres could have aught in common with a daring young degenerate who referred all origin to the common father Adam, and roundly asserted that the possessions on which they based their pretensions to govern the less fortunate portion of mankind were nothing more nor less than plunder wrung from the people by the violence and rapine of their forefathers.

The gallant colonel, who viewed his son’s heterodoxy with as much regret as his careless nature could permit, and who, though neither clever nor talented, had yet possessed a sufficient amount of worldly tact and shrewdness to get on very comfortably in life, called Hugh to his bedside in his last moments, and solemnly spake these words :

‘ You are a clever fellow, Hugh, and, with your headpiece, ought to make a creditable figure in the world ; but mark my words, my dear boy, you will never get on if you don’t make up your mind to drop those confounded Radical ideas. I am sure I don’t know where you got them from ; all my family and all your poor mother’s family have supported Church and State from time immemorial, and no man succeeds who departs from the traditions of his family. Take my advice, my dear fellow. I have seen something of the world, and it’s a very good, comfortable place, if you know how to rub along with its prejudices and respect what it respects ; but if you are foolhardy enough to run counter to it, you will find it has got a thousand nails to scratch you with, and a thousand tongues to spit its dirty venom on the man who offends it. So my advice to you is, adopt the politics of a gentleman and a Hammersley, and leave these howling tinkers and tailors, and all the rest of the discontented devils, to do their own dirty work, without soiling your fingers in it.’

Hugh could scarcely repress a smile at his

father’s selfish and unprincipled, though probably well-meaning, harangue ; but he could not comfort the colonel’s last moments with the promise of espousing the politics of a gentleman and a Hammersley ; so presumably the latter departed this life with the conviction that his son was infallibly on the high road to ruin.

Thus on the death of his father Hugh found himself almost friendless ; his father’s *bon vivant* companions, who had helped to squander the fortune which should have been the son’s, turning a cold shoulder to a man whom they perceived to have such little sympathy with their tastes and pursuits. Into politics therefore he plunged heartily. He was possessed, as I have said, of a commanding presence, and his fiery and sonorous eloquence soon converted the new recruit into a leader among his associates. No great meeting was complete without the presence of the young democrat, and his entrance was the signal for an enthusiasm which it is rarely given to even the most renowned leaders of popular agitation to excite.

Amidst these busy and stirring scenes he managed to secure time for prosecuting other triumphs in addition to those exclusively political. There were a few great Liberal houses to which his connections and influence outside the walls of Parliament procured him entrance. Chief amongst those who invited him to their banquets and gatherings in the hope of softening down his Radicalism, and securing his unquestioned ability on the side of a more moderate party, was the Earl of Marsdale; and this nobleman had such faith in his own powers of diplomacy that he would often assert to his confidants he had no doubt of succeeding in toning down young Hammersley into a very respectable Whig.

While, however, the diplomatic earl was congratulating himself on his missionary talent, young Hammersley was exerting his powers of persuasion in a very near quarter—in fact, on the heart of Lady Maud, the earl's third daughter. Young, enthusiastic, romantic, with intellect sufficiently powerful to despise the trammels of conventionality, and discernment enough to appreciate the difference

between gold and tinsel, she had fallen desperately in love with Hammersley, who was to the full as enamoured of her. As the Earl of Marsdale’s diplomatic hairs would have bristled with indignation at the bare idea of an alliance between a commoner with eight hundred a year and his most beautiful daughter, on whom he relied to make a magnificent match, the young couple took the management of their love affair into their own hands, and one morning the fashionable world, and those who, though not fashionable themselves, hang on the movements of those who are, were startled to read of the elopement of Lady Maud Anson, the beautiful daughter of the Earl of Marsdale, whose presentation at Court had created such a sensation, with Hugh Hammersley, Esquire.

Of course, Lord Marsdale was furious, and vowed he would never forgive the child who had so bitterly disappointed him ; nor did he till within a few hours of his death, which took place three years after her marriage ; and then, probably feeling the impiety of earthly resentments in the presence of that great

Republican, Death, who respects neither crowns nor coronets, he sent for her to his bedside, blessed her tenderly, and left her ten thousand pounds.

The young couple had lived since their marriage on the eight hundred a year left by the colonel, and though it was a wretched pittance for a woman reared in the lap of luxury, and a man whose tastes and habits were naturally expensive, in spite of his Radical proclivities, yet I don't think either had derived other than unqualified happiness from the step they had taken. One child, a boy, had been born to them, and, fortunately, no other children had followed in his wake.

Hammersley was a man who was an adept in almost everything that required daring and tact. His wife's ten thousand stirred fresh ambition in him. He was aware that to invest it what is termed safely would have the effect of making very little addition to his income; he therefore determined to speculate with it in that most dangerous of gambling places, the money market. His own thorough knowledge of financial science, and perhaps

also exceptional good fortune, stood him in such stead that in a year and a half his most sanguine hopes were more than realised, and Lady Maud’s ten thousand was trebled.

He felt now that with economy he could enter Parliament. There was no difficulty in getting returned ; his immense popularity secured an easy defeat of his opponent ; but his political enemies and the neutrals who discussed him in an abstract kind of way were very curious as to the result, well knowing that the House of Commons was a very different gathering from a popular assemblage, and auguring that the great democratic leader would find himself out of place in the unaccustomed atmosphere.

To the surprise of most, however, he displayed considerable tact on his introduction to that august assembly. Although his principles remained unshaken, he fully recognised the inexpediency of airing theories or enunciating dogmas to an audience by whom they would have been instantly hissed down. On his first speech the House was naturally curious to hear a man who had achieved such

a political reputation outside its doors, and, to the disappointment of those more rabid of his opponents who only waited an opportunity to hiss him down, he spoke calmly and temperately, without uttering a word which could have been interpreted into an excuse for annihilating his political existence in that chamber.

The good impression he had made he cultivated by yet further efforts, always ready to advocate the popular cause with voice and vote, but never imperilling his advocacy by rash utterances. If the inevitable consequence of this temperance was that the more violent of his supporters outside began to look upon him with some distrust as a man whose freedom of thought and speech had been cramped by his elevation, the more sober and sensible saw in him a friend, who could advance their cause better by conciliating temperately with their opponents than by flaunting the flag of defiance in their faces with every mark of open and bitter warfare.

He was looked upon, therefore, throughout the country and in the House, as a rising man.

He was advanced from one lucrative post to another by the Ministry, and every one prophesied a seat in the Cabinet was not far distant, when his cousin, Lord Carnmore, died suddenly from the effects of a fall in the hunting-field, and the two intervening lives having been snapped before in a most convenient manner, Hugh Hammersley succeeded to the peerage and twenty-five thousand a year.

The advent of such good fortune to a man who had hitherto experienced so much difficulty in making both ends meet, and who, in spite of his utmost efforts, had found his expenditure more usually than not outstrip his income, seemed certainly a blessing for which most people would have been exceedingly grateful; but the one grain of alloy in this otherwise perfect pleasure was that the possession of riches entailed what appeared like political exile. No man of active and busy brain, the most enjoyable part of whose life, the period of high hope and youthful energy, had been passed in politics and amid assemblages where politics meant appeal to passions



and awakenment to enthusiasm, could contemplate a retreat into what its admirers term the 'first legislative assembly of the world' without something of a prescient shudder. The House of Commons is not, except when some unlucky member stumbles upon one of its most deeply-cherished prejudices, quite so emphatic in its likes or dislikes as an assemblage composed exclusively of 'the people'; but still there is an element of masculine vitality in it, which one looks in vain for in its more select and aristocratic neighbour.

However, it was no use grieving over the inevitable, so he took his seat in the House of Lords, and soon made himself at home there, and achieved oratorical triumphs as great and as appreciated by his hearers in a little less emphatic manner, as those he had gained amid the sympathetic cheers of St. Stephen's. Whether his elevation in rank advanced his claims to greater importance in the eyes of the Government of the day I do not know; at any rate, six months after the death of his cousin, Lord Carnmore was

offered, and accepted, a seat in the Cabinet.

Thus, in a few years from his entrance into political life, he had graduated to the highest honours. He had married brilliantly, at least in point of position. Nearly everything he had applied himself to had succeeded beyond even his expectations. Surely his was an enviable lot, when, at thirty years of age, a peer of the realm, the possessor of a fine fortune, a minister, the husband of a beautiful and devoted wife, he had reached the highest rungs of the ladder which so many scarcely less deserving or less talented people are such weary years in climbing.

But the faithful spirit whose sweet ministering had cheered him in the days of comparative struggle and adversity, was not permitted to enjoy for long the better fortunes that succeeded. Two years after her husband’s accession to the peerage Lady Carnmore died of a low fever, commending with her latest breath her one little boy, six years old, too young to be sensible of the irreparable loss he had sustained, to the care of her eldest married sister.

The death of his wife was the breaking-up of Lord Carnmore. It is popularly supposed that ambition, once ensconced in a man's heart, leaves little room for any other idol ; but Carnmore's nature was essentially romantic : he had even imparted romance to his politics, which are generally considered a subject so very practical. His love for his beautiful wife had been the romance of his life, and their wedded existence, to procure which both had made sacrifices, had only seemed to strengthen the tender ties that bound their hearts together. Had he married one he less loved, or wedded later in life when his fame was made, he might have borne his loss more stoically ; but the dead one had commenced life with *his* life, had advanced side by side with every step he had made, and the memory of the past was so bound up with the memory of her, that it seemed mockery to imagine he could ever forget, or to know otherwise than that henceforth ambition and fame must alone content the heart whose sweetest yearnings were so rudely silenced when they bore *her* to her grave.

The sister to whom Lady Carnmore bequeathed the care of her child had married the Marquis of Allerton, a nobleman of great wealth, and of some, though not considerable, political importance. Lord Allerton and his wife had been the only members of the family who had not excommunicated Lady Maud on her imprudent marriage, partly, perhaps, because they felt some sympathy with her proceedings, insomuch as—though forty thousand a year and a marquisate did away with all objections in the late Earl of Marsdale’s eyes—their marriage had been really one of love on both sides.

Five children, ranging in age from two to twelve, attested the happiness of their wedded relations ; and nothing therefore was more natural than that Lady Allerton should, in compliance with her dead sister’s request, take her child to bring up with her own family.

Hitherto the reader has only seen the bright side of Lord Carnmore’s character, as exemplified in his love for his wife, and the affection for his fellow creatures, as displayed

in his efforts to ameliorate their condition by sweeping and radical reforms; but, on intimate acquaintance, the dark shades were found to preponderate considerably. From some inherent defect in his nature, he was always supposing evil in his fellow-beings. The most harmless actions became in his eyes significant of the most deeply-grained villainy, and consequently anything good or noble had to undergo a most severe mental scrutiny before it enlisted him as a believer.

Naturally, therefore, Lady Allerton's readiness to undertake the office of mother to his son aroused considerable suspicion in his ever suspicious mind. The heir to twenty-five thousand a year would be no bad match for one of the three daughters with whom she was blessed, and whom she would, of course, be delighted to dispose of to the best advantage.

Whether this consideration operated, together with her natural kindness and the affection she had borne her dead sister, in making her evince such promptitude in carrying out her request, I do not know. That

the young Frederick Hammersley would be a most eligible *parti* even for a daughter of the rich Lord Allerton, no one could deny ; that her maternal instincts would induce her to do the best for her children that lay in her power, was equally probable. But I think Lady Allerton had too pure and noble ideas of what marriage should be, to force any one of her daughters into one of those matches which, whatever its eligibility in the eyes of the world, is a sinful covenant, insomuch as it is a union of acres, and titles, and worldly possessions—in short, of everything except hearts.

However, that which Lord Carnmore had suspected, and which Lady Allerton might at least have hoped, if she had not schemed for, took place. The little Edith Stewart was just a year younger than her cousin when he came to reside under her mother’s roof—a beautiful, capricious little elf, with the childish, winning ways that gave promise of the riper fascinations of the woman. Hers was perhaps the highest style of beauty—dark auburn hair, bright hazel eyes, contrasted with the

most delicate complexion—her features were simply faultless, without that insipidity which often accompanies too regular lineaments. All the Allerton children could lay claims to be called pretty or handsome, but the first glance would have selected Edith as the flower of the flock.

Of this fact her youthful cousin seemed to be very fully aware, for a very few days after his installation into the family he evinced his admiration by keeping as much in her company as possible; nor did the small maiden appear at all unconscious of his attentions, or unwilling to accept them. Thrown together thus by mutual liking, the childish acquaintance speedily ripened into a deep boy and girl attachment, giving every promise of increasing, till it should reach the happy consummation of matrimony.

Up to the age of fourteen Fred Hammersley had been educated at home, but it was then deemed expedient to send him to Harrow, whither two of his elder cousins had already preceded him. It is almost needless to say that his departure for what seemed an inter-

minable period occasioned many a deep and poignant pang to the two small hearts to which it proclaimed separation, and which, probably, felt none the less keenly because they were small. Edith had tried her best to keep up her spirits as the dreaded time drew near, after exhausting all her powers of arithmetic in counting the hours, minutes, and seconds that must elapse before her darling cousin should be restored to her companionship; but when the sundry preparations for departure indicated the close proximity of the inevitable hour, the broken-hearted little maiden could no longer dissemble her emotions. It was quite touching to see how eagerly she followed her young lover about, as if fearful of losing one fraction of the precious moments that remained. A hundred times a day did she exact the most solemn promises as to his punctuality in correspondence, and compel him to repeat again and again his vows never to love any other little girl as he loved her.

Such a profusion of protestations was almost unnecessary, for Fred was to the full as

enamoured of his beautiful cousin as she of him ; and although he betrayed his grief in a less demonstrative and more masculine fashion, it was to be doubted whether parting from the child who had been his companion for eight years was not as painful to him as her.

The fatal day arrived, and the Honourable Frederick Hammersley set forth to commence his experience as a public school-boy. Edith had purchased a beautiful little Bible as a surprise gift, and at the last moment, her hazel eyes suffused with tears, and her musical little voice choked with the emotion from which she suffered, she presented it to him, with a solemn injunction to always think of her when he looked at it ; and then, bestowing on him a shower of kisses, she retreated from sight of the odious carriage that was to take him away, and, going to her own room, buried her head in her hands, and sobbed miserably.

The soothing effects of time, in conjunction with several visits paid to Harrow on half-holidays, where Edith and her cousin would roam through the somewhat circumscribed

gardens of the King's Head Hotel, holding sweet converse together, sufficed to mitigate the severity of her grief. But the childish hearts were in no whit estranged by the forced separation—on the contrary, rather more closely drawn together; and the days on which mine host of the King's Head was bidden to hold a private room in readiness for Lady Allerton, as well as that more lengthened period in which the young Harrovian could go to sleep without being awakened in the morning by that 'dreadful bell,' which pulls them unwillingly out of their beds for the perusal of Cicero and other classical lights, were to be marked with chalk in the young lovers' calendar.

At Harrow Fred progressed favourably: he had inherited his father's abilities, and he proceeded from one form to another as rapidly as it was possible to do. In less than two years he had obtained admission into that dignified and powerful body, the upper sixth. Nor was he only what is termed, in the elegant vernacular of Harrow, a *swhat*, but he was equally great in what the choice spirits

of the school regard as the *summum bonum* of human ambition—cricket, football, and racquets. His bowling and batting powers soon placed him among the eleven—a band of heroes who were, at least in every period of which I remember, and probably are now, emphatically the gods in whose worship all Harrow is united. What a glorious day was that for Edith when, just turned her fifteenth year, she sat in her mother's carriage, her fair face flushed with pride and emotion, watching intently the proceedings of eleven young gentlemen equipped in flannel, her eyes riveted especially on one figure who was going through a series of sundry eccentric evolutions, which in ordinary language is termed bowling, but which, to her enraptured vision, seemed to be the most exciting and extraordinary performance ever witnessed. How every nerve tingled when the loud shouts of the partisans of the dark blue announced the fall of another enemy's wicket before the irresistible assault of her hero; and what congratulations and laughter at dinner next day, when the match ending easily in favour of

Harrow, Fred Hammersley’s claims to the gratitude of his schoolfellows rested on the fact of his having secured eleven wickets, and scored, in the two innings, a total of one hundred and twenty-five runs.

At eighteen Hammersley proceeded to Oxford, where he stayed about two years, during which time Edith was presented, and created some sensation in the fashionable world by her beauty and powers of fascination. She and her cousin were still as fondly attached to each other, though perhaps they were a little less demonstrative in their affection than in their younger days. The pride of the woman had succeeded to the artlessness of the child, and regulated action and speech into harmony with the notions of maidenly dignity. A great change of character, too, had slowly taken place in Edith. As a child she had been wilful and capricious, wilfulness and caprice soon, however, ending in penitence and regret for their indulgence. As she had grown up, these feelings had degenerated into a haughtiness and stubbornness, which detracted strangely from the

fascination which was as great, if not a greater charm than even her beauty.

In their childish quarrels she had pouted and sulked for a short time, but was never slow in receiving or making overtures for a reconciliation, and always ready, after they had become friends again, to blame her own hastiness and ill-temper as the cause of the disagreement; but, as she had grown up, this amiable trait had gradually disappeared. No matter whether in the wrong or the right, rarely would she sacrifice her dignity sufficiently to sue for peace, and in extending pardon to any offence of her lover she would usually supplement it with the chilling commentary, that though she forgave she would never *forget*.

I have omitted any description, however slight, of her cousin's character, because I consider this will be best acquired by the reader from his actions as set forth in these pages. He received frequent letters from her while at Oxford, in which she dwelt, with all the enthusiasm of a girl just admitted into the world of gaiety, on the perpetual *fêtes* and

parties, her every-day proceedings, the flower-shows she attended, the balls she danced, and, not unfrequently, the attentions and compliments she received. Perhaps this latter item was put in, in simple obedience to that spirit of coquetry which is supposed to be inherent in every woman, merely to let her lover know he was not the only one who appreciated her; but, as if to make amends for any unpleasantness this information might cause him, she would add a rider to the effect of how much more she would enjoy her gay existence if he were there to participate in her pleasures too.

On leaving Oxford, and entering the world of fashion, he found his fair cousin had already established around her a numerous train of admirers—men for the most part of the best kind, whose admiration conferred distinction. Certainly Lady Edith Stewart must have had wonderful powers of fascination, for she contrived to keep her courtiers very loyal without any of those palpable efforts by which the majority of even the most beautiful coquettes are compelled to maintain their rank intact.

There was no regular engagement between the young couple, Lord Carnmore, whose opinion of his son's choice was by no means favourable, having stipulated that they should wait at least a year to prove the strength and durability of their attachment. Although naturally impatient at the restriction, Fred could hardly help admitting the justice of his father's reasoning when he pointed out to him that there is an immense difference between the feelings of a young girl brought up in comparative seclusion with a companion, whom the want of any others to afford a comparison or contrast with leads to regard in an affectionate light, and the feelings of the woman, when her experience becomes so much wider, and there is every opportunity of meeting with some one more congenial to her tastes and inclinations.

Edith, on her side, declared that being engaged or not made no difference. If, she argued philosophically, they loved one another, that was a sufficient tie in itself, and if they should see anyone they liked better, why then they were free to consult their own happiness;

but, observing a somewhat pained look on her lover’s face at this rather careless way of dealing with the matter, she took the sting out of it by assuring him that if he cared as much for her as she for him, that could never happen.

It may, however, be imagined that her evidently deep-rooted habit of flirtation found little favour in the eyes of her cousin. It formed the basis of many quarrels between them, in which she would haughtily insist on her perfect liberty to do as she pleased ; to which he would retort that she owed him the same duty as if the world had publicly recognised them as lovers.

It will be easily seen from this that there were a few clouds upon the horizon of their loves, which might in time assume formidable size. I shall now no longer weary my readers with more tedious description, but allow them to make the acquaintance of the personages of my story for themselves.





CHAPTER II.

A FASHIONABLE BEAUTY.

WHATEVER the justice or plausibility of his other charges against the aristocracy, the most uncompromising Radical can scarcely assert they go through no hard work. That the labour is self-imposed does not lessen its severity ; and certainly the votaries of fashion, in their desire to see and be seen, in their efforts to get themselves off, or their daughters off, display an amount of unwearyed application to their voluntary task, that would not contrast unfavourably with the same quality in those less fortunate of their fellow-creatures who are compelled to toil and spin for the bare necessities of existence.

Riches seem to create *ennui*, and, consequently, the necessity of distraction : and it

speaks badly for the effects of the highest education that it seems to make those who have enjoyed its benefits disgusted with their own society, and compelled to rely on others for amusement. There is more philosophy than many wot of in that hackneyed old line of the *Delectus*, '*Opes irritamenta malorum.*'

The lamps shine over a good number of presumably brave men, and apparently fair women, assembled in the saloons of Lady Morton, the wife of a political peer, Philip, sixth Earl of Morton, a member of the Cabinet, and descended from a family whose legislative abilities, such as they were, have ever made them well-known to their countrymen. At his house you may be sure of meeting with a pretty good sprinkling of celebrities of all sorts ; for it is not a rendezvous exclusively reserved for those who attach themselves to the *rota fervida* of the political chariot.

That tall-figured man talking to the earl in rather low tones is Lord Carnmore. It is probably some State secret the brother ministers are discussing, for as a younger

politician approaches them the confidential whispers cease, and the conversation becomes general. Lord Carnmore is still young for a public man—only forty-six ; but his somewhat chequered career and his domestic loss have told on him, and made him look more over fifty than under it ; but in spite of the deep lines on the massive forehead and round the corners of the firm, determined mouth, his features are still sufficiently well preserved to induce the gazer to guess that the youthful sobriquet of ‘ Handsome Hammersley ’ was well deserved.

That rather good-looking blonde man, with a slight tendency to *embonpoint*, talking to Lady Alicia Nettlethorp, a veteran flirt, whom four unsuccessful seasons of angling in matrimonial waters has rendered rather acidulated and irritable towards younger and more attractive rivals, is Mr. Melton, one of the richest commoners in England, and although only twenty-four, a shining light on the turf. He is a very old friend of the Allerton family —indeed some sort of connection by marriage—and a still greater one of Hammersley’s.

They were at Harrow and Oxford together; from which latter place Mr. Melton was rusticated a year after he entered for some foolish escapade which the authorities could not be induced to look upon in its proper light. Passionately fond of horses and all appertaining thereto, he immediately turned his attention to the turf, and his immense fortune was amply sufficient to allow him the gratification of such an expensive taste.

There is an unmistakable air of geniality and *bonhomme* about Melton which makes him equally popular among his own and with the gentler sex. He is a friend of nearly all the reigning belles, but no one seems as yet to have succeeded in cultivating more intimate relations than those of friendship with him, although he is, of course, an object of great interest to match-making mammas, who are not insensible to the advantages of sixty thousand a year for their marriageable daughters.

Lady Alicia is not on duty at the present moment; she is talking to Melton quietly and unaffectedly, for she has proved some time ago

that her battery of charms are powerless to captivate the wealthy commoner. Lady Alicia is a very common type in the fashionable world. When she came out she created rather a sensation, for, although not entitled to take first rank as a beauty, she was rather handsome, with plenty of liveliness, and that admirable gift of small talk and repartee which goes far to secure a social reputation for a woman. She was launched, therefore, under very favourable circumstances, and a tolerable share of offers fell to her lot, but in her opinion they were none of them equal to what her looks and accomplishments entitled her to expect; and so, in waiting for something better, Lady Alicia, like the discontented animal in the fable, in seeking the shadow lost the substance, and her chances now, with so many rivals in the field, seem small.

The well-dressed crowd at Lady Morton's are split up, like most other crowds, ill or well dressed, into various groups, the centre of each usually being some man celebrated for his talent, or some woman renowned for her wit or beauty, or probably for a combination

of both. But foremost in the field to excite the envy of the women and attract the homage of the men is Lady Edith Stewart. Her warmest admirers stoutly assert her claims to be considered clever, and repeat her *bon mots* and good things with enthusiastic emphasis; but I doubt whether there is much depth in Lady Edith's cleverness. She is sharp, and has a fair amount of repartee, which enables her to frequently come off conqueror in verbal amenities with the 'gilded youth' who throng around her; but there is nothing strong-minded or intellectual in her composition, and those who observe her most closely notice that in the presence of a social 'lion' she relies rather on her charms than her talents to create an impression.

No inefficient weapon are those same charms either. The most captious critic could find no fault with the perfect beauty of the fairest daughter of the house of Allerton—the daughter whom the world, although in receipt of no official confirmation of the fact, has long ago shrewdly suspected as designed to link the houses of Allerton and Carnmore closer

together. Little change, save the necessary development time effects on all, has taken place in her since the day when her boy cousin became an inmate of her mother's household. Those who knew the child Edith would recognise her instantly now. The same rich auburn hair, the same 'perfect lips,' on which it had been bliss to at least two men to

'Waste their whole heart in one kiss.'

and, more powerful yet in its influence than all—than the faultless beauty of face or person—that dangerous gift of fascination, which, from the days of Eve downwards, has made beautiful women so fatal to the peace of mind of those men to whom their glamour and enchantment more often prove a curse than a blessing.

Light-hearted enough she seems now—a queen enthroned in the admiration of her courtiers, exchanging jest and repartee with the throng around her, and, either from vanity or carelessness, conquering, like the fair Francesca—although differing somewhat in nature from that rather pensive maiden—

'Hearts she ceased to prize.'

The most favoured among the group, if one may judge by the frequency with which she addresses him in preference to the others, and the appreciative smile which she accords to his sallies, is that ornament to society in general, and the household brigade in particular, Mr. Rochester. This gentleman is considered by his friends, male and female, the handsomest man of his day ; and although objections might be taken to the slightness of his figure as detracting from the *tout ensemble* of a 'beauty' man, none could be preferred against his face. If all the stories told of him be true, he has in a short time contrived to deal more havoc among the hearts of susceptible maidens and frail matrons than is usually accomplished by that limited class of creatures who take for their motto in all *affaires-de-cœur* the Cæsarian maxim, 'I came, I saw, I conquered.'

Fascinator as Mr. Rochester has been, it seems now as if his own time had come, and that he who had enslaved so many hearts must end by losing his own. His homage to Lady Edith has been characterised by a

devotedness never before observed in the careless *insouciant* court he has hitherto paid to other women acknowledged as beauties ; and some tongues are heard to whisper that his devotion is not altogether unappreciated. Whether it is that she really likes him better than the herd of more commonplace men who compose her train, or that she thinks him useful to play off against her lover, or because she is proud of the conquest of a man whom she knows so many of her rivals would give anything to attach to themselves, is best known to herself. At any rate, one thing is certain, that, had she not already acquired a reputation for coquetry, which, from its open indulgence, must be necessarily harmless, her encouragement of Rochester has been such that most people would be justified in thinking he was the favoured one.

I have wandered from the spot where I left Lady Alicia and Melton talking. They are standing near the group of which Edith is the centre, and Melton, perceiving the eyes of the elder beauty fixed in that direction with no particularly amiable expression, remarks—

‘Her ladyship has created more sensation than anyone in our time: don’t you think so?’

Lady Alicia smiles: she always does on the least provocation, because it affords her an opportunity of displaying a brilliant set of teeth, which is about her best point; but, having made this concession to her vanity, there is a sarcastic vibration in her voice as she replies—

‘She is backed by all the “talent,” as they say in the language of sporting circles.’

‘What surprises me,’ continues Melton, seeing the subject is somewhat unpleasant to his companion, and mischievously dwelling on it in consequence, ‘is how she contrives to keep the ranks of her admirers so intact. A desertion is a most rare occurrence.’

‘Flirting seems to take with most men, now-a-days,’ says Lady Alicia, snappishly.

‘Flirting!’ answers Melton, with a meaning smile. ‘Do I hear aright? A Clodius come to judgment! How long is it, pray, since you discovered the heinousness of that innocent pastime?’

‘There’s flirting and flirting,’ says her ladyship, with dignity. ‘I call Lady Edith Stewart’s proceedings far too fast to be classed with ordinary flirtation.’

‘I understand,’ rejoins her listener, drily. ‘Poor Edith! I don’t think she is aware of the scandal she creates.’

‘I wonder *you* don’t go mad after her,’ says Lady Alicia, sarcastically. ‘You seem at present the only man who can talk common sense when her name is mentioned.’

‘I played with her when a child,
She promised then to be fair,’

laughs Melton, easily. ‘Perhaps if I had not had the benefit of that early acquaintance, I might have been smitten; as it is, I am too used to her fascinations to fall a victim.’

There is silence for a moment; presently he adds—

‘I fancy it is a hopeless case with Rochester; don’t you?’

Lady Alicia pauses a little: it is hard for a disappointed beauty to openly acknowledge the conquests of her rival.

‘Yes,’ she says, slowly, ‘I think he’s rather hard hit.’

‘And,’ he asks, more hesitatingly—‘I know women are such wonderful judges of each other—do you think she returns it at all?’

‘I know why you ask that,’ returns her ladyship, with a suspicious smile—‘in the interests of your *fidus Achates*, Mr. Hammersley; but, you may take my word for it, she does not care for Rochester in her heart, much as she apparently seems to like him. You can never be deceived, at least, *we* can’t, when a woman loves a man. You wait till Hammersley comes to-night. You will know well enough when he is in the room by her restlessness; you will see her eyes furtively watching his every movement; but you may look a long time before Rochester’s proceedings create any such interest. And now I have been candid with you, be frank with me: is not Hammersley desperately *épris* himself?’

‘If you ask me my opinion,’ says Melton, gravely, ‘I should say he thinks of nothing else day and night.’

‘I am sorry for him,’ answers Lady Alicia

(she is not at bottom at all bad-hearted, only a little soured and disappointed with her own crosses and vexations), 'for he has great talent, and is fitted for something better than making himself love-sick after a flighty, frivolous girl.'

'You are rather hard upon her,' says Melton, protestingly.

'I don't wish to be hard upon anyone who doesn't deserve it,' answers Lady Alicia, gravely; 'but, mark my words, I can read her character as well as if I had been brought up with her from a child. Whoever takes Edith Stewart for a wife will reap more misery than happiness from it. If she does not love her husband she will torment him, and if she loves him she will torment him worse. Whenever she marries you will find I have been a true prophet.' And Lady Alicia, moving away, leaves Mr. Melton to digest her somewhat gloomy prognostications.

He is not, however, long destined to indulge in his own reflections, for on turning suddenly round he encounters the keen, bright glance of Lord Carnmore, who is just moving off to

give the House of Lords a touch of his fiery eloquence.

‘Well, my young turfite,’ he says, pleasantly, for Melton is rather a favourite with him, ‘has our manœuvring friend, Lady Alicia, been angling in your quarter?’

‘Gad!’ answers Melton, somewhat bitterly, ‘whenever a woman addresses a man who is cursed with a large fortune, his friends always place the attraction to his fortune, not to him.’

‘That’s the best of being poor and stupid,’ says the peer, smilingly. ‘You can’t be married for your money or flattered for your genius.’

‘Whenever I feel disposed to take a wife,’ remarks Melton, ‘I think I shall roam about disguised, like the lord of Burleigh did, and bring home some humble maiden to share my splendour.’

‘And be ashamed of her, if she fails to conform herself to her unaccustomed sphere. King Cophetua and the beggar-maid does not answer now-a-days, I am afraid.’

‘Perhaps the best thing is not to marry at all,’ says Melton.

‘A wife,’ answers Lord Carnmore gravely, ‘is either a crown of glory or a crown of thorns: if the former, there’s not a greater blessing; if the latter, scarcely a worse curse. Take an old man’s word for it, Melton. There are a few, a very few, women about worth, to use a hackneyed but still forcible expression, their weight in gold. But the more I see and the more I contrast, the more I find that the majority of them are not worth one thought of a good or noble heart.’

He speaks this very energetically: perhaps his fancies are wandering back long years ago to the one woman who was his ideal, and the like of whom he has failed to meet in his lonely pilgrimage through life since.

Presently his keen, restless glance, ever in search of something, rests on the group around his future daughter-in-law; and the rather melancholy expression that was on his features just now gives place to a sarcastic one as he says to Melton:—

‘The queen of beauty attracting the usual amount of emptyheadedness and coxcombriness,

noscitur a sociis—fit worshippers at such a shrine.'

' You are rather prejudiced in that quarter, I am afraid,' answers Melton, to whom he has made no secret of his dislike to the approaching match.

' I am not prejudiced,' returns his lordship (people never are in their own estimation); ' but I have lived to my years for no purpose if I can't read some characters that are as patent as the light; and I say, for the hundredth time, that the man who marries Edith Stewart will rue his infatuation for a pretty face before the honeymoon is at its wane.'

Nearly the same words as Lady Alicia just employed. Mr. Melton feels rather uncomfortable for his friend, and he attempts to temporise.

' She is young, you know, and perhaps just a little intoxicated with the admiration she meets with everywhere, but I am sure she has a heart.'

' A heart ! ' repeats his lordship, contemptuously. ' A flirt like that with a heart—bah ! I will tell you what, Melton, if you want to

prove your friendship for my son you will do your best to wean him from this foolish passion, this untutored fancy of a romantic boy.'

'This is no boyish fancy, my lord,' he answers, quietly. 'Pardon me for saying so; but I know Hammersley on this point better than you, and I know his cousin has the power to make or blast his happiness.'

'All young men say and think this,' returns the peer, incredulously (it is astonishing, none are harder or more inconsiderate to lovers than those who have loved passionately themselves); 'but a few months' absence would cure him.'

Melton shakes his head at this easy and light-hearted manner of disposing of our nearest and dearest affairs, and his lordship retires to electrify the Upper Chamber.

Lady Edith's admirers have melted away one by one, and she is left alone with Rochester. Near this beautiful creature, whom his whole heart goes out to adore, he can scarcely compel his lips to keep guard over the passion that is surging so fiercely within. He knows his

suit is hopeless ; the unerring instinct granted to lovers makes him see that if this girl has a heart, the possession of which he is in moments of bitterness tempted to deny her altogether, it is given to Hammersley. But still he cannot rend his fetters ; he waits with a patient, dog-like fidelity, trusting that some sudden accident, some unexpected revolution of the wheel of fate, may offer him as the only acceptable lover left.

‘The brilliant train has melted away,’ he says in that low musical voice which has won its way to so many women’s hearts, ‘and the queen of beauty is left with only one poor faithful knight to proffer his homage.’

‘*Faithful knight!*’ returns Edith, mockingly, turning on him the brilliant eyes that gleam with no answering love, but with that chilling *friendly* glance that is almost harder to bear in the utter hopelessness it conveys than the flash of hate or scorn. ‘And to how many more besides myself have you perjured yourself in that fashion ?’

‘However I *have* perjured myself,’ he answers quickly, ‘I speak nothing but the

truth now. You must be convinced—no woman in such a case could be blind to it—of the sincerity of my devotion.'

There is a passionate vibration in his voice as he says this, that would carry conviction to most listeners ; but Edith seems absorbed in her own reflections, and scarcely heeds him.

' Do you believe me ? ' he asks, eagerly.

' Believe you ! ' she repeats, starting from her reverie. ' I hardly heard what you said. I really don't know ; I have not thought about it.'

' Have you a heart ? ' he says fiercely, anger getting the better of his love at this proof of her indifference.

' Have I a heart ? ' she answers gaily. ' Well, I am not quite sure, but I fancy so, for I feel something beat when I am frightened.'

' Fright is the only thing that makes it beat, I suppose ? ' he inquires, sarcastically.

' Why do you ask ? ' she says, trifling with her fan to conceal a little embarrassment that she cannot help feeling.

' Because I imagined, although I dare say

I am wrong to do so, that it might occasionally feel a pang of remorse,' he returns, with a sneer.

'I don't understand you,' she answers, rather wondering at this strange manner in one usually so imperturbable and self-possessed as Rochester.

'I mean,' he says, hurriedly, and he speaks like a man who is suffering under some terrible emotion, 'that sometimes, when you have nothing in particular to occupy your thoughts, you might think over the unhappy victims (a sneering emphasis here) upon whom you have exercised your fatal fascination ; that you might sometimes wish to recall the words or smiles uttered and given, doubtless, with no intention on your part, but which have sufficed to make fools of them ; that you might, perhaps, be induced to think that the peace of mind of a man who begins by admiring and ends by *loving* you is not to be played with and cast aside like a toy that has lost its novelty ; that you might remember, and draw from that remembrance a lesson

for the future, that what is simply to you amusement may be death to them.'

During the whole of this singular speech she has kept her eyes steadily fixed on the ground, avoiding the searching and impassioned gaze that seeks her own ; but now, when he has finished, she raises them proudly and defiantly to his face, and the hot colour mounts angrily into her cheeks as she says—

' I will not affect to misunderstand your words ; I will answer you by asking one question. Have I given to you or to any other of your acquaintance one word or look of encouragement incompatible with my faith to another man ? Have you heard, either from my sex or your own, a whisper that could tarnish my reputation—I will not say as a lady, but as a woman ?'

She has turned on him so suddenly that he is fairly taken aback by her angry burst.

' I have heard nothing,' he answers gloomily, ' and I accuse you of nothing. I spoke rashly, and perhaps unreasonably, but I did so,' he adds bitterly, ' because I was half mad at the

time, and because it is my misfortune that I have a heart which *can* feel.'

There is so much of pathos in his tone, that it would win the sympathy of a harder-hearted woman than Edith.

' You know I have never deceived you,' she says more gently. ' When you asked me, months ago, I told you my faith and heart were alike given to another, and that even had it not been so I could never have been anything to you but a friend. Have I since that day been guilty of a word or action that could induce you to think I had changed ? '

' Oh, no,' he says, the bitterness still in his tone, ' I have no one but myself to blame for my folly ; you have always been hopelessly friendly. I would sooner far you *hated* me than this, for you *would* think of me then, although it was only bad you thought ; now I know you never remember me a moment after I am gone.'

' I *do* like you,' she says frankly—and her steady colour and steadfast glance, as she says it, justify Lady Alicia's assertion that Rochester awoke no tender interest in her—' as a

brother or a dear friend. I would prove it gladly if ever you stood in need of friendship.'

'Thanks,' he answers sadly: 'I suppose I must be content with that.'

And here, in the midst of a crowd of people watching their neighbours' proceedings, to extract therefrom what theme for scandal they may, was perpetrated this little tragedy between two young people; the one—to whom it was indeed a tragedy—the next moment mixing among his fellows as gaily and indifferently, to all appearance, as if he had never known the pain of disappointed hopes.

It is not always those people who go about in sackcloth and ashes, with all the trappings of woe, who have the heaviest burdens to bear. Many an aching heart lies hidden behind a smiling lip; and I believe the worst sorrows are those which the sorely-stricken never tell to human ear, but shut sadly and resolutely up in their own breasts.

Scarcely has Rochester concluded his unsatisfactory interview when Hammersley enters from St. Stephen's, whither he was returned as an advanced Liberal to represent

the borough of Middleton about six months ago. His *debut* was very promising, and men whose good opinion carried weight with it were not slow in confessing that the young politician had inherited a good share of the family ability.

He exchanges a few words with Melton, who happens to be near the door when he enters, and, after greeting Lady Morton, crosses over at once to his cousin, who perceives immediately, so well has she learned to read every expression of his countenance, that something has occurred in another quarter to ruffle his temper.

You cannot call Hammersley good or bad looking—it is the face of a clever man, with clear, resolute, and well-defined features, yet not harmonising sufficiently with each other to constitute beauty. His forehead is high and well-shaped, he has brilliantly-white teeth, and a passably good firm mouth; but, if he has any pretensions to beauty at all, they lie in his clear dark-blue eyes, which are very penetrating and expressive. Whiskers and hair of a light-brown hue complete the

tout-ensemble. His figure is tall and well-proportioned, neither slim nor herculean.

As I have said, Lady Edith perceives he has been ruffled ; and such is the fact. He had made a very good speech that evening in the House, which had been received with a proper amount of appreciation by his own party ; but in the course of his remarks he happened to make himself rather disagreeable to one of the great men of the Opposition, who, presently rising, indulged in a fair amount of satire at his expense, and concluded by characterising him as ‘one of that numerous and daily increasing class of young politicians designated by their lenient friends as rising men, who mistake personalities for argument and presumptuous assertions for authoritative statements.’ On this some well meaning gentleman had cried out ‘Order.’ Hammersley got up very excited, the Speaker interfered—the honourable member for Middleton was reminded that he had commenced personalities, and a good ten or dozen other interfering legislators put in their say, until the whole matter was wound up by a good-humoured

attempt on the part of the leader of the Government to explain away his young supporter's meaning, and to convince the right honourable gentleman opposite, &c., &c., after the usual fashion of parliamentary squabbles.

It is this little occurrence that has disturbed his serenity, and Edith being, for a wonder, in a particularly good temper herself, determines to win him to a softer mood, and accosts him graciously :

‘Have you been electrifying St. Stephen’s to-night, Fred?’

Of all subjects she could choose, this is of course the most unpleasant one; but poor Edith is not aware of this, and only wishes to be amiable.

‘I don’t know about electrifying,’ he answers, while the recollection of the ‘right honourable gentleman’s’ sarcasm makes him look and feel crosser than ever: ‘I spoke as I intended; that’s all.’

To this not particularly conciliatory rejoinder Edith returns a short ‘Oh,’ and relapses into silence. Her cousin’s mood, however, soon contrives to provoke her into an aggressive

frame of mind likewise, and she says coldly :

‘ You don’t seem to be overburdened with amiability to-night.’

‘ I have no doubt,’ he replies with a sneer, ‘ that my powers of entertaining must seem vastly feeble compared with those of the numerous throng that attends you before I come.’

‘ I can’t compliment you on them at the present moment, I must say,’ she answers curtly.

‘ Your friend Rochester, for one, has been as pleasant as usual, I suppose?’ he asks, looking at her coldly.

‘ I don’t know that he has been particularly *pleasant*, as you call it,’ she rejoins, flushing angrily, ‘ but at any rate he contrived to say *something*; he was neither *dumb* nor *sulky*.’ And with this rejoinder Edith relapses into sulky dignity herself—a proceeding which has the effect of bringing her lover round, for he says, presently—

‘ I beg your pardon, Edith; I was in a bad temper, I know; but I was very much annoyed and insulted by H—— in the House to-night,

and, like a brute, I was bound to resent it on the first person with whom I was sufficiently intimate to pick a quarrel. You will forgive me, won't you? You know you are the last I should wish to offend.'

His voice is very winning as he says these words; and his eyes are correspondingly eloquent as he looks in the fair face of his cousin; and she, ever in her hates or loves a creature of impulse, cries, almost before he has finished his apology:

‘Of course I will forgive you, Fred; it only makes the ten-thousandth time that you have been unkind to me, and sorry for it afterwards.’

And so they make it up, at least for this time; but the course of Hammersley's serenity has been too roughly disturbed for even Edith's fascinations to restore him to good-humour; so it is evident that while in this mood a very little will provoke a fresh quarrel.

There is no modern ‘gush’ or effervescence about Edith. She does not go into real or pretended raptures over a beautiful piece of

music or poetry, or a splendid painting. A casual acquaintance would be inclined to think she had no very deep feeling, but she is only one of the many exceptions to the fallacy of judging by appearances. There is nothing of the credited coldness of the Northern clime about her ; she either hates or loves, and, whichever she does, it is done heartily and thoroughly. Careless and almost cynically indifferent as she appears to the outward observer, she is at heart as romantic a girl as ever breathed ; but, perhaps unfortunately for herself and for others, her romance is locked up in her own bosom, and none of her friends dream of its existence. Pride, which with her is an unconquerable disease, prevents her from descending to those soft, winning moods which, after all, are so powerful in wooing and retaining a man's love, insomuch as they make woman appear in her true and proper light—dependent on and looking to man for protection. Passionately as she loves Hammersley, it is only on rare occasions that she will permit her love to appear, and, more often than not, in spite of

these occasional evidences of affection, he finds himself seriously perplexed to determine whether his cousin has or has not outlived the fancy of her childish years.

To-night Edith is in a sentimental mood—in that sort of mood common to young and ardent lovers when they are prepared to hear

‘They know not what of wild and sweet’

whispered by the lips they love; but it is a curious circumstance that these two young people can never be in an agreeable frame of mind together when Edith is fascinating Hammersley is correspondingly chilling, and *vice versa*.

I don’t know what it is that has turned her thoughts in a sentimental direction to-night, except perhaps it has been her conversation with Rochester. At any rate the fact remains, and she presently addresses her cousin :

‘Fred, does not this remind you of the old times, when we used to sit together as children in the little pavilion at Allerton on summer mornings?’

If he were only decently amiable, here were a good opportunity to dwell on that somewhat

sentimental period, and deduce from it some pleasant auguries for the future, &c. As it is, the allusion seems to convey more bitter than sweet to him, for he answers with a half sneer—

‘Two grown-up people sitting together can’t look very different, save in the matter of size, from what they appeared when sitting together as boy and girl, but there may have come a great alteration in their relations to each other, which is able to constitute a very wide difference.’

‘And how are we changed since we were boy and girl together?’ asks Edith softly; for perhaps she feels there are some grains of truth in her lover’s insinuation.

‘Immeasurably,’ he answers with a laugh that does not sound like that of a very contented lover. ‘*Then* you were a girl, ignorant of the world or the admiration that awaited you there; *then* you were content with the love and appreciation of one: *now* you are the successful beauty, flattered and courted by those whose admiration should be worthless to a pure heart, but which, it seems, has become necessary to your existence.’

There is so much suppressed bitterness in his tone, so much of wounded feeling, as he contrasts the past with the present, that Edith feels conscience-stricken.

‘I know it well enough,’ she says, half sadly: ‘I have seen it long before you said as much as you have to-night. You don’t care for me half as much now as then.’

He looks at her gloomily, with the eyes from which his momentary indignation and disappointment cannot banish the great love, and he says—

‘God knows, Edith, *my* love has undergone no change. You are as dear, if not dearer, to me now as ever; but can I be as sure of you? Is the love of the woman the same as the love of the child?’

‘Oh Fred,’ she cries passionately, ‘how can you ask me? Are men so blind that they cannot *see* when they are loved? Is there so little in common between our natures? Was the spell that drew us together from the first hour we met as children so weak that you fear to trust me now? If you think that my heart is to be turned away from its great

love by the empty praise and flattering nothings of the professional Apollos one meets with in “society,” you wrong, not only my faith, but your own worth.’

‘You don’t know my character yet, Fred,’ she continues, shaking her head at him, with a rather sad smile. ‘You think I am flighty and frivolous, and—you need not deny it—heartless too, because I do not speak and act in the manner that girls with less pride do. But you know pride was always my besetting sin, even as a little child, and it is that now which makes me seem cold and haughty, when in reality I am heart-broken and miserable.’

‘And why,’ he asks gravely, ‘will you not strive to conquer this pride, which not only raises doubt in those who love and think, therefore, they know you, but, according to your own confession, renders you equally unhappy?’

‘I *do* try,’ she says, and her beautiful face looks very earnest as she speaks. ‘I *do* try with all my strength. I feel I am very jealous, and envious, and paltry, and mean,

and shall never be loved or respected by those I care for till I am better. I *want* to be good. Will you tell me how to set about it ?'

'I have given you my prescription many times before,' he answers, with an impatient shrug of his shoulders, 'but you never give my medicine a fair trial.'

'I am in earnest now,' she answers quickly. 'Do tell me what to do to—to make you like me better, and I will try, upon my honour.'

'Give up flirting to begin with,' he says, sternly.

'I don't flirt, Freddy,' she replies, stoutly. 'I can't be rude to people because they talk to me, and perhaps—perhaps admire me just a little, you know. Only you are so jealous, you imagine if I laugh with a person I must be desperately smitten with him.'

'I am not the only one who condemns you,' he says, severely. 'You have the character of a coquette in every drawing-room in London.'

'And who is it given me by ?' she answers, poutingly. 'By women who are envious ; by

men I won't condescend to speak to ; and by a stupid, jealous old lover, who is so absurdly fond of me himself that he fancies everyone else wants to take me away from him.' And as Edith says this she looks up into his somewhat grave countenance with a most fascinating smile.

' You may be innocent enough according to your own thinking,' he answers, in nowise mollified by her insinuating manner ; ' but you are none the less culpable in other people's estimation or in mine.'

' Pooh ! ' retorts Edith, resolving not to be vexed. ' Why should we care for the cackle of superannuated matrons and disappointed maidens ?

" If you love me as I love you,
Nothing but Death shall part us two."

Be content with that, and don't be always suspecting and doubting, for it really only makes me more wilful.'

' Come, Freddy,' she adds presently, calling him by the name he was accustomed to hear from her in childhood, ' we have quarrelled

enough for one night. Suppose you take me to mamma now, and to-morrow come round early, and (she whispers here) then we'll kiss and be friends.'





CHAPTER III.

‘KISS AND BE FRIENDS.’

A BACHELOR’S apartments are, at their best, dreary, and their aspect is scarcely likely to be improved in the eyes of their owner when he enters them directly after some moral or mental unhinging, such as Hammersley had sustained in the respective arenas of love and politics. Luxurious as would have seemed the bed on ordinary occasions, when sleepiness renders a man less fastidious to all surroundings, at the present moment it did not appear in the least associated with the idea of repose. I think there is no period in which mental anguish is more terrible to be borne than in that when our earthly cares and troubles are supposed to experience a brief oblivion. In the daytime there is

always *something* occurring which can wean our mind away for a little time from that which troubles it ; but in the night, when there is not a single remnant of human existence left to suggest consolation or disturbance, how vividly are we reminded of the sorrow whose memory we would fain banish from our life !

Hammersley dismissed his valet, for the presence of anyone at that moment was an irritation, and, seating himself in an arm-chair, abandoned himself to his own reflections.

However deeply we love, how much easier it is to doubt the fair one’s fidelity than to believe in her faith ; in fact, I think our scepticism increases with the strength of our passion. Hammersley had known Edith from almost a baby. Their childish pleasures had been enjoyed in common, their childish griefs wept together ; but yet at times a doubt would steal across him, in spite of those rare yet earnest moments when her love, breaking down the barrier of maidenly reserve or pride, would declare itself unequivocally in glance and speech, whether it would not have been

better for his happiness, and perchance for her own, if their lives had been sundered in the first boy and girl dream of love.

Truly it is only in the privacy of his own chamber that a man's nature can be known for what it is. In general society young Hammersley was considered, save by the one or two who were his intimates, as cold and hard—the last from whom one would have expected passionate love. The world guessed pretty accurately that he and Lady Edith would most likely make a match of it; but her they regarded as a coquette, and as her lover never displayed any of those spaniel-like attentions in public which some men think it their duty to pay and some women theirs to exact, they augured that it would prove a marriage resembling a great many more contracted in the exalted sphere of fashion—sufficiently promising in a worldly and prudent point of view, but one in which there was little affection on either side.

So might many have reasoned from mere casual observation. Proud natures display their love as little as possible. With Ham-

mersley, as with Edith, pride was so great as to amount to a positive disease, and each would have shrunk beyond all things from the thought that any one of their proceedings before others could have furnished plausible data for indicating that their affections were deeply engaged ; as if such a fact involved a personal humiliation.

Alas ! through pride came the first murder wrought on the young earth ; through pride fell a goodly proportion of the angels ; and even at this day how many crimes and—almost as bad as they—how many broken hearts and blighted lives can be traced for their origin to that same most deadly of all moral diseases !

Sleep came at last to the eyes of Hammersley, and in the morning he awoke in a rather more cheerful mood. His philosophy and common sense returned to his aid. Scarcely very formidable allies these, I fear, when doubt, jealousy, and all the other rancorous family begotten by love are in the field. His horse was brought round, and he turned in the direction of Belgrave-square, in virtue of an appointment to ride in the

Park with Edith. There was no one in the drawing-room as he entered. The marchioness was not one of those ladies who consider that one of the greatest secrets of preserving health and good looks consists in early rising. The marquis was preparing his equestrian toilet, and the two other members of the riding party, Edith and her sister Florence, were doing the same.

Edith was the first to make her appearance, probably from a wish to have a few moments alone with her lover, in order to complete the reconciliation begun the night before. If she seemed beautiful in most ordinary costumes, she looked absolutely bewitching in her dark riding-habit, fitting so closely, and revealing to perfection the exquisite symmetry of her figure. It was impossible to be long angry with such a marvellously beautiful creature ; and though all the bitterness aroused by his reflection the previous night was not altogether vanished when he entered the house this morning, I think, when he saw her crossing over to him, with that slightly subdued penitent expression on her face

which he who knew her so well in some things read as significant of her eagerness to ‘make it up,’ as they say in childish quarrels, his love was many degrees stronger than his resentment.

He kissed her as usual, and she, returning the caress with just a little extra warmth, said, in the pretty, half-pleading voice that reminded him of their young days, when they were both a little less dignified than now—

‘We are quite friends again now; are we not?’

He did not answer for a moment, but looked straight into her dark hazel eyes, which, somehow, did not appear so brilliant as usual this morning.

‘What is the matter with your eyes?’ he asked; ‘they look so dull. Have you been crying?’

Edith flushed slightly, and half turned away her face from the scrutinising glance that sought her own.

‘What nonsense! What should I find to cry about?’ she said, hurriedly, but by no means assuredly, plucking nervously at her

riding-whip, with the restlessness that was always observable about her when detected in anything which tended to lower her dignity or pride in her own eyes.

‘That sounds remarkably like prevarication,’ he said, turning his glance in the direction of her retreating countenance. ‘Why not confess the truth—yes or no?’

‘Well,’ she cried, looking up at him reproachfully, ‘I did cry a little bit this morning. I felt in such low spirits, and I was thinking how unkind you were to me last night, and how everybody seems to think badly of me. So, one way and another, I got very miserable, and made a stupid of myself, as your unpleasantly sharp eyes have already discovered.’

I suppose most people feel a pride in knowing they can exercise an influence over the emotions of others, and this confession of Edith’s certainly seemed to put Hammersley into a better humour than before, for he spoke very gently to the fair young creature by his side :

‘I am sorry, darling, you should be grieved

at any fancied unkindness of mine. You know, or ought to know by this time, that my only wish is to make, not mar, your happiness.’

It was not often that Hammersley made such a pretty speech as this. Deeply as he loved, he was too proud to indulge in those honied phrases and stereotyped compliments which, however worthless they may seem to the ears of really sensible people out of love, are seldom without their effect on those whom love makes so susceptible. His pride stood really in the way of his making himself agreeable. He was horribly afraid, as most proud natures are, of giving more than he received ; and hence Edith often thought him cold and indifferent. She was rather touched by this speech, therefore, for she knew when he ventured on a compliment it was almost sure to be sincere from the fact of its rarity.

‘You say so now and then, Fred,’ she answered. ‘It is not often you condescend to say that little which I suppose every girl has some right to expect from her lover ; but if you only want to make me happy, as you

express it, why are you always finding fault with me? why always saying such bitter and unkind things?'

'And when I do say bitter and unkind things,' objected Hammersley, 'do you think they are altogether unmerited?'

'You should not be too hard upon me, Fred,' she exclaimed, petulantly. 'You know I am wayward and wilful, and have been accustomed to be petted and spoiled by everyone since I was a baby; and if people try to coerce me, it only makes me more determined to have my own way. You know all this, and therefore you should not judge every little word or act, as if I were one of those calm, cold-blooded people, who never say or do a thing without thinking it well over beforehand and thoroughly weighing the consequences.'

'And if I school myself so far as to look upon your frequent ebullitions of temper as harmless, will you extend a similar indulgence to my own unfortunate infirmities?'

'Oh, that is very different,' returned the young beauty. 'Anyone can see I only speak

and act from *pique*, but *you*, you say such bitter, cutting things, they seem as if they had been prepared, were hung ready cut and dried in your own mind months and months before you uttered them.’

‘I am afraid, Edith,’ said her cousin, drawing her a little closer to his side, and looking down gravely into her face, ‘that, in spite of the years we have “lived and loved together,” we know as little of each other’s character as if we were comparative strangers.’

‘You don’t understand me in the least,’ she replied, energetically ; ‘but I think I know you pretty accurately. I know you are very jealous and exacting, and, last but not least, Fred, very unjust and unkind.’

There is nothing after all for a woman like the *tu quoque* argument. It is the very best weapon with which she can parry the often too well-founded attacks of her lover ; and as Hammersley listened to the petulant girl beside him he began to think that he was not perhaps so little to blame in all their quarrels as he had fondly imagined. He bent over her tenderly.

‘We will make a compact, Edith,’ he said. How many had they not made already, only to be dissolved almost immediately by their own want of forbearance to each other’s failings! ‘I will try to be always kind henceforth, if you will promise, on your side, to appreciate my efforts. Is it a bargain?’

She nodded her pretty head in token of assent.

‘And now,’ he added, ‘since we have settled matters so amicably, let us kiss and be friends.’

‘We have kissed just now,’ she answered, smilingly.

‘Our ordinary salute,’ objected her lover; ‘not the kiss of peace. Remember it was you who made the proposal last night.’

Seemingly nothing loth, Edith lifts her sweet lips to the ones that seek her own; and they both meet in a long, fervent kiss, unwilling, as it seems, to tear themselves apart; such a kiss as we can only give in our first passionate youth, when love surges through our veins like the lava flood, and only to *one*—the one who first converts our boy dreams of love into reality.

There are kisses and kisses ; but I think those we give in the first dawn of our youthful feelings stand a thing ‘by themselves apart.’ The decorous caress we share with the lawful partners we have taken, after we have lost for ever the hopes we indulged in with another—the respectable salute we inflict on sisters, aunts, and all the rest of our friends or family whom it is a duty to embrace—how different from that

‘Long, long kiss, the kiss of love and youth ;’

whose very memory even stirs the old pain, which we fondly hoped was dulled for ever.

I believe any assembly of decent and worldly mothers will inform me that it is not proper for young people to kiss, much less so passionately as my hero and heroine, before they are engaged ; in fact, some very much dislike the idea of the performance taking place at all until marriage has given the husband a right to indulge in such little weaknesses. I daresay all this is very correct and respectable, but neither Edith nor her lover, I fear, were particularly observant of

worldly forms and ceremonies. They were rather addicted to make their own impulses and desires their law, in lieu of adopting what other people considered as right. I don't hold that such extreme latitude of opinion leads to much good in the end ; but then, you see, these two young people loved each other passionately, and between such the God who created them has formed a tie—a deep, insoluble union of soul and heart—that chains forged by human hands can only help to bind more strongly, but whose absence cannot render the compact void in the eye of One greater than this world.

‘Edith,’ said Hammersley suddenly, after that long sweet caress, ‘will you promise me you will never kiss another man like that ?’

‘Why do you ask ?’ she replied, rather startled by his energetic manner. ‘It will be your fault if ever you give me the chance or the wish.’

‘God knows,’ he exclaimed quickly, ‘I would sooner bear anything than part with you of my own free will ; but, somehow, a presentiment will steal across me—and I try

to cast it off in vain—that something will soon come between us.’

‘Why do you delight in tormenting me?’ she cried passionately, raising her great angry eyes to his face. ‘Why are you always indulging in these doleful prognostications of the future? Why can’t we agree together happily and comfortably as other people do? I am sure no other man ever vexed a girl as you do me.’

‘Does the idea of our separation torment you so?’ he asked, quietly, looking searchingly into her eyes.

‘Of course it does,’ she answered, tears of rage, or petulance, or whatever it might be, gathering in her eyes. ‘You speak to me, and of me, as if I were destitute of a spark of feeling—as if I were selfishly wrapped up in my own existence, and caring nothing for those who are near to me.’

‘Sometimes I fancy you have no feeling,’ he said, regarding her with considerable doubt on his face.

‘Oh, Freddy,’ she exclaimed, more sorrowfully than angrily, ‘how you do misjudge me!

Don't you know the old proverb, "still waters run deepest?" When will you learn to trust me as you should do ?'

What Hammersley might have replied to this must be left to conjecture, for at that moment Lord Allerton's step sounded in unpleasant proximity to the lovers.

'One more kiss,' he said quickly, conscious that no time was to be lost. 'Kiss and be friends once more, you know.'

Her lips met his eager ones willingly, and parted only just in time to escape the glance of her father. I think no other man will ever win such a kiss as that from Edith Stewart.





CHAPTER IV.

‘A NEW ACQUAINTANCE.’

A MAN of intellect is unfortunate in this respect, that he is compelled to despise so much of what he daily sees and hears. It must be a very lenient or a little observing person who, after mixing much in the world, can derive from his experience any very favourable opinion of the majority of his fellow-creatures. Perhaps the general weaknesses and vices of society are more repellent in the *crème de la crème* than elsewhere, from the fact of that oligarchical body arrogating to itself an infallibility in manner and deportment which, however much coveted, is never openly claimed by the humbler grades of social life. The aristocrat despises, and perhaps justly, the *parvenu* who trust in his

money-bags to buy him into a class superior to his own; but when we see how these exclusives will fawn and cringe to a greater man of their own sphere, to gratify what may be *their* ambition, it seems that a philosopher would regard both with an equal amount of contempt.

Hammersley was a philosopher in this way. He was very sceptical; and a man who is this, if he persistently follows out his own reasonings, will soon find himself opposed to most of the opinions of his fellows. Nothing was respectable in his eyes merely because it had existed before his time, or because it received the sanction of others. Like most young gentlemen of an unquestionable genius, in which scepticism is a considerable ingredient, he had grand schemes for the amelioration of the world—schemes which most of us discover in due time to be very impracticable, but which, nevertheless, we believe in most implicitly in our enthusiastic youth. The rudest shock to experience for a man who has lived all his youth in the ideal and the romantic, is his first mixing among his fellow-creatures.

The narrow aims, the sordid ambitions, the selfishness, the duplicity, the credulity that permeate the mass of humanity, will even disgust the more thoughtful among practical and worldly men. How much more revolting are they then to the pure-minded realist?

This revelation which begins at school, and ends only when we have done for ever with our fellows, had rendered Hammersley’s creed this—that he honoured mankind, but despised man. He honoured ideal mankind as he pictured it should be, the reflex of the most glorious attributes of its divine Creator: he despised it as he found it, fallen from that high standard, and striving not after the true, the noble, and the pure, but after those which a diseased and fantastic morality established as such.

If Hammersley found so much to shock his fastidious notions of right in men, he was still more disappointed in women. A woman in his eyes should have been a type of moral and social perfection, as man of moral and intellectual—a being with whom one could associate none but the purest and holiest

thoughts. It is almost needless to say that, among the daughters of society, he had discovered nothing approaching to his ideal. Passionately as he loved Edith, he knew that she could be no companion to him in the sense in which he understood the word. It was not that she was completely destitute of that romance which gives a warmth and colouring to even the most commonplace natures, but her romance was that which generally obtains amongst women not absolutely cold-blooded, and which can be comprised, very shortly, under the following heads: To have some one who can love them passionately, rejoice in their smiles and tremble at their frowns; who could, in fact, be a very slave to their caprices. Beyond this purely selfish romance she had none, and could not sympathise with the more extended quality in others. The religion of her life was to love and be loved: greatness, talent, power, she desired none of them.

With Melton, again, much as he liked him, Hammersley found no real companionship. Melton was clever in a certain sense, but it

was the cleverness of the world, of the business-like, practical man ; or, rather, it was just the difference between cleverness and intellect which is so immense when one sees the two compared. It can thus be seen that neither in man nor woman had Hammersley found a real companion, the sweetest privilege of whom is not merely to share in our society, but to participate in our dearest thoughts and aspirations.

It was one night, shortly after the events recorded in the previous chapter, that Hammersley was present at one of those ever-recurring assemblages of the select class known as 'good society.' He was standing alone in a rather out-of-the-way corner, meditating on the scene before him, when he was joined by a brother member, a Mr. Saville.

This gentleman was the second son of a Yorkshire baronet. A maiden aunt had left him a very respectable income, which had relieved him from the necessity of working, or pretending to work, for his living. He had entered Parliament in the extreme radical interest ; and though his principles were too

advanced to secure much chance of what most politicians regard as the goal of political ambition—place—his talents as a debater, and his reputation in literature, gave him a sufficiently distinguished position in society. The people who would have suffered most, had his radical theories been put to the test of experience, leniently looked upon them as harmless, and remembered the fact that he was of good family ; that his elder brother had no children ; and that his own income was sufficient to entitle him to respectful consideration amongst any assemblage of manœuvring mothers.

Hammersley and he were acquainted slightly ; but this evening he seemed determined to know more of our hero. They exchanged a few remarks on the House and parliamentary matters, and then the conversation fell on the scene before them.

‘I think,’ said Saville, presently, ‘that the effects of civilisation have been these—an improvement in manners, a deterioration in morals.’

‘You deduce that opinion from the con-

temptation of the well-dressed mob before us, I suppose?’ replied Hammersley, with a smile.

‘Perhaps I go too far in affirming it has lowered our morals; I should rather say it has kept them at a standstill.’

‘I understand you. You would contend that the uncivilised Indian, with his squaw and his dusky-faced children, are, save in the mere matter of habiliments or the absence of them, no whit inferior to the family of Lord A—— or Lord B——?’

‘Precisely so,’ returned Saville. ‘Our civilisation is a sham. We raise our hands and shut our eyes at the word “prostitution”; we deplore what we term the “social evil,” and we come here in the market-place of fashion and barter the happiness, the peace, the modesty of our daughters for the glittering baubles and titles of an artificial rank. Marriage of convenience is another name for / prostitution.’

‘You would provoke indignation loud and deep were that spoken to a larger audience,’ said Hammersley, smiling.

‘Nobody condemns himself,’ answered

Saville. ‘Society thinks that by tacking a new name to an old vice it can blind other people to its iniquity. It is a hypocrite as well as a knave. It was much the same before the Flood : people ate, drank, and were merry, and shut their eyes to their own wickedness, until the waters came and swallowed themselves and their impurities.’

‘And public opinion, I hope, will some day do for us what the Flood did for them,’ said Hammersley.

‘The work of regeneration is beginning now,’ replied Saville. ‘Slowly, I confess, but still the wedge is in. Caste is being abolished more and more—barrier after barrier overthrown. Look at the House of Commons as constituted now. See the enormous number of self-made men, merchants and others, who would have been excluded not long ago. Look at society itself. Wealth walks side by side with unblemished lineage and high rank. It will admit all wealth that is not absolutely vulgar. This shows the gradual decay of exclusiveness.’

‘Still,’ replied Hammersley, ‘I don’t see

that such being the case improves the general condition of mankind. What we consider the highest steps of the social ladder may be more easily climbed by those on the lower rungs ; but are we not climbing in a false direction ? Should a man’s ambition limit itself to be received among a few people who call themselves society ?’

‘True,’ answered Saville, thoughtfully ; ‘it seems that we all become *parvenus*, each aping his neighbour and losing his own individuality ; but then you can only break down exclusiveness by making exclusiveness common. If you once make society such that it is open to all, it becomes society in the true sense of the word, and ceases to be a class.’

‘I should like to discuss these points with you in a less crowded situation,’ said Hammersley, smiling. ‘This mass of lace, and jewels, and gleaming shoulders, dazzles the eyes, if it may not confuse the understanding.’

‘Nay,’ answered Saville, gaily ; ‘they are like subjects to the anatomists ; they are the lay figures on whom we build or unbuild our theories. But if you would prefer tranquil

discussion, it is soon done. Are you disengaged on Friday? If so, dine with me then, and we will not separate till we have mapped out some scheme for the better advancement of social wellbeing.'

Hammersley accepted the invitation with eagerness, for there was something in Saville's earnest, though cynical nature, that touched a congenial chord in his own breast. Beside, it was rather flattering in a man of Saville's age—he was past thirty—to make such pointed overtures to a man eight or nine years his junior.

They separated almost immediately, for Saville had some other engagement, and Hammersley was waiting till Edith made her appearance. That capricious and popular beauty came soon, and was surrounded shortly by her usual host of admirers; but on that night she was more indifferent to their homage than usual, and devoted herself assiduously to her lover, doubtless wishing to perpetuate the *entente cordiale* that had been established between them.

And with Edith's words ringing in his ears,

Edith's bright eyes looking into his own, Hammersley felt that the world was not so disagreeable or so disappointing after all, if we only tried to make the best of it.

So it is with us all I suppose. Men of the world, romantic dreamers, sages, philosophers, we are all fools in the hands of the baby-boy, Love.





CHAPTER V.

‘CLOUDS ON THE HORIZON.’

THE acquaintance commenced between Hammersley and Saville soon ripened into one of those friendships which are so rare, because they spring from an intense similarity of thought and feeling. The ordinary friendships of the world are like the ordinary marriages: they are the result of suitability in point of rank, occupation, wealth, in all consideration, in fact, which should occupy a very secondary place in either friendship or love.

The effect of the new acquaintance was in a great measure to take him away from Melton, who had formerly occupied the position of *fidus Achates*. But this latter gentleman was not easily offended; and, moreover, the

proximity of Ascot and the St. Leger furnished him with such weighty matter for reflection, and necessitated so much personal locomotion, that it was rather a relief than otherwise to find the claims of friendship less exacting.

Edith had been very gracious of late ; for what particular reason her lover was at a loss to discover ; nor is it probable that she could have assigned one herself. Her nature was so impulsive and impressionable, that her moods would sometimes vary a dozen times a day without her being conscious of the fact. Like all sensitive people, she easily took offence, and in nine cases out of ten imagined it where it was never intended. The fact of it was, Edith had been simply spoiled. From her childhood her marvellous beauty had made her the pet and idol of everyone who knew her ; and when she went out into the world she discovered how easily men will bow the knee to loveliness. She lived in the atmosphere of compliments and flattery ; and although she was too sensible not to discount very considerably the language of the 'gilded youth' around her, yet, to a young and

beautiful woman, all such homage is welcome, because it is an indication of her power.

It was precisely in this respect that Hammersley failed. She scarcely ever heard from him any of those pretty little nothings which, from a lover's lips, can be complimentary but yet sincere. Perhaps had he loved her less, he would have made a more agreeable admirer; as it was, his pride always stood in the way, urging him not to humiliate himself by betraying a love to which there might be no adequate return.

They were much alike, these two, after all : both proud natures, haughty and almost cold without, deep and passionate within. Yet this pride of Hammersley's vexed Edith, although it was but the counterpart of her own infirmity. The course of true love never does run smooth, according to the adage ; but theirs had flowed particularly rough. Some people say they like to quarrel, because the reconciliation afterwards is so sweet ; but I think nearly every quarrel leaves a sting behind that no after-reconciliation can obliterate. Harsh words—perhaps harsh truths, but none the less

unpalatable because truths—are spoken then, which sink down very deep, and are not forgotten or forgiven because we are told afterwards they were only said in anger. In all love that is marred by such unhappy quarrels a bitterness will subsequently intrude that renders it far from what it should be.

But when they agreed to bury the hatchet, to hush the ‘memory of a thousand wrongs’ done by each to the other, they could be very agreeable indeed. It only needed one to take the initiative, and the other was sure to follow. The only pity was that this pleasant state of affairs was seldom of long duration.

So Hammersley seemed to think one evening at his aunt’s. He had been dining there, and had taken Edith down to dinner. In the drawing-room later on there was a goodly assemblage of the fashionable world, but the young people contrived to secure a corner to themselves where they could enjoy a reasonable hope of an uninterrupted *tête-à-tête*.

‘It seems to me, Edith,’ he said, looking very fondly at the beautiful face beside him, ‘that you and I have been very happy together lately.’

‘It all depends upon you,’ answered the young lady. ‘If you are kind and amiable, I follow suit. If you only knew how to treat me for ever like this, we should never have a difference of opinion, much less a serious quarrel.’

‘You speak so determinedly,’ said Hammersley, smiling, ‘that I begin to have an uneasy suspicion that I alone am to bear the blame of our ever being unhappy.’

‘No, I don’t mean to say that quite,’ she answered, rather conscience-stricken at her lover’s condemnation of himself: ‘I know I am very capricious, and wilful, and worrying sometimes; but then I should soon come round if you would only humour me. I am like a high-spirited horse—pulling the curb too tightly only makes him more restive; thwarting me only makes me more determined to have my own way.’

‘I won’t dispute your equine simile,’ said Hammersley; ‘but I want to talk to you on a serious subject. You know that by next month the term of grace in which we are supposed to have learned our own minds will expire.’

‘And then we are to be engaged publicly, if your wicked father will allow us,’ said Edith with a pretty pout.

‘I don’t suppose my wicked father, as you call him, will refuse his sanction, after my obediently waiting so long.’

‘I should like to know why he dislikes me so much,’ said Edith, with the restless curiosity of her sex.

‘He does not dislike you, my dear, that I am aware of.’

“Nonsense! of course he does!” she answered energetically. ‘If it had been otherwise, why would he have wanted us to keep in this half-and-half condition, except in the hope that you would get tired of me and marry somebody he liked better?’

Hammersley did not offer anything to refute this view of the question, so Edith continued—

‘I wish you would tell me what are his objections to me, Fred. You ought not to have any secrets from your future wife, you know.’

Hammersley coughed rather uncomfortably at this invitation.

‘Do tell me,’ she said, coaxingly; ‘I know he is a nasty, cantankerous old man, and I will promise not to be offended, but I should so like to know what he said to you when you first asked his consent.’

Thus abjured, Hammersley respected his father’s confidence no longer.

‘Well,’ he answered, hesitatingly, ‘he said a good many things—a great deal more at the time than I paid any attention to. Besides, he really did not mean them: he would have said the same of any woman. His real objection was not to my marrying you, but to the fact of my marrying at all: he considered there was time enough for that ten years hence.’

‘Now, Fred,’ said Edith, indignantly, ‘this is prevarication. I don’t care whether he meant what he said or not; I want simply to know what he *did* say.’

‘If you *will* have it then: first of all he remarked that you were vain; next he considered you frivolous, and too fond of admiration and gaiety to make a husband happy.’

‘And something else, too; I know by your

face,’ said Edith, impatiently. ‘Pray let us have the last item—vain, frivolous, fond of admiration and gaiety! Yes, yes; what else?’

‘He further hinted,’ continued Hammersley, slowly, ‘that you seldom read, that you took no interest in intellectual pursuits, and, in fact, insinuated that you would only be a suitable wife to some gay butterfly of fashion.’

A deep blush rose to Edith’s cheek. She was very tender on the point of her intellectual acquirements and deficiencies. Although she affected not to like clever people, she was secretly hurt if anyone imputed to herself a want of cleverness.

‘In all of which objections, but particularly in the last one, you agreed with him, I presume?’ she asked angrily.

‘My dear Edith,’ answered Hammersley, somewhat enjoying the tempest he had raised, ‘you promised not to be angry, and you are now testifying your inability to keep your word by visiting the sins of the father upon the children. Why assume my participation in my worthy parent’s want of discernment?’

'I asked you if you agreed with him,' she repeated obstinately.

'I did *not* agree with him as it happened,' was the answer.

'But you did not contradict him, I suppose?'

'What was the use?' replied Hammersley, provokingly. 'I could scarcely affirm with truth that you were free from vanity; I could not represent you as a model of staidness and decorum; as for your reading, you never did me the honour to inform me of any literary studies, so I concluded that in that conjecture he was most probably equally sagacious.' He little knew how his assumed indifference was wounding the sensitive heart of his listener.

'Thank you a thousand times for your good opinion,' cried Edith, passionately, 'which, by the way, I have known long ago. I have no doubt you and your delightful father think me a poor, ignorant, unsophisticated creature, without an idea of my own. If you are so fond of intellectual women, why don't you marry a blue-stock? There are plenty about

not overburdened with lovers or offers. There is your dear friend Mrs. Jerningham opposite. I daresay she will be able to sympathise much better with your ideas and tastes than a person who is so deplorably ignorant as myself.’ And, so saying, Edith leaned back in her seat, pretending to look indignant, while in reality every pulse was throbbing with anger at what she considered the heartless injustice of her lover.

Hammersley was to blame. He knew that by a few kind, gentle words, he could have obliterated the indignation she naturally felt at listening to his father’s uncomplimentary description ; but, instead of that, he taunted her further by hinting that he fully endorsed it. He felt he had gone too far ; but the spirit of mischief had full possession of him that night, so, instead of repairing the wrong he had done, he simply increased it.

‘ It seems highly improbable that harmony will be restored between us for some time,’ he said, in that indifferent, careless tone which is so provoking to a woman ; ‘ so I think I will follow your advice, and exchange ideas

with Mrs. Jerningham.' And, leisurely rising, he made his way over to the lady in question.

Mrs. Jerningham was a widow whom her female acquaintances could not make out to be more than twenty-seven, so the probability is she was more likely under than over that age. At seventeen she had made a marriage of convenience. Mr. Jerningham was everything that could be desired in a husband from a worldly point of view—wealthy, bland, affable, and liberal as to settlements, and when, five years after his marriage, he crowned a fair life with an honourable death (it was gout I believe that laid him with his fathers), most people considered that Flora Jerningham had done better for herself than a good many other equally ambitious young ladies.

It was generally surmised that, having made a match to please her friends, she would soon contract a fresh alliance to gratify herself; but although only twenty-two, and singularly handsome, Flora refused to entrust her happiness to any one's keeping save her own. Since it seems a law that a woman without domestic ties must find or must invent some-

thing to occupy her, she took to literature, and published a volume of poems, which were well received by the critics and the public, and procured her some importance amongst her own set. She followed up her first success with a second, still more assured, till people began to think that the young widow was a wonderfully clever person, and *fêted* and caressed her accordingly. But though very much admired, she was on the whole rather dreaded; for her tongue was apt to be biting and merciless on occasions, and at no time was her satire of that good-natured description which leaves little or no sting behind. Most ordinary-minded young ladies found Mrs. Jerningham a trifle too sarcastic for their companionship, and the young men who could only rely upon their fashionable qualities for a reputation were very cautious not to venture within reach of her conversational powers. Still, in spite of the wholesome fear with which she was regarded by a great portion of those with whom she came in contact, people were glad to get her to their parties, and she received as much homage as usually falls to

the lot of distinguished female authors. With her and Hammersley there was that kind of easy, familiar friendship which is frequently found between two clever people who admire each other's talents, but between whom there could never exist any softer feeling.

They conversed together for some time, and presently Saville entered. As he was about to pass them Mrs. Jerningham's voice arrested him :

‘ Mr. Hammersley and I are just discussing which is the most absorbing passion, ambition or love. Lend us the assistance of your powerful intellect to decide, Mr. Saville.’

‘ Of ambition,’ replied Saville, taking a seat by her side, ‘ I, in common with every man who has at least the wish, if not the ability, to be better than his fellows, might say something ; but of love I have had no experience—I can only imagine.’

‘ And what do you imagine love to be ?’ asked Mrs. Jerningham, gravely, bending on him her large, dark, eloquent eyes.

‘ A beautiful selfish paradise,’ answered Saville, ‘ the two dwellers in which consecrate

to each other, and lay at each other’s feet, the hopes, the loves, the ambition that should be at the service of mankind ; a state of being that opens the heart to one influence so completely as to deaden it to the introduction of every other ; a bright, beautiful, delusive, unsubstantial dream, but,’ he added, with a smile, ‘so bright and beautiful that I would tremble at the awakening.’

‘ And this I am to understand is what you *could* feel, not what you have felt ? ’ inquired Mrs. Jerningham.

‘ What I could feel were I to meet with my ideal.’

‘ I wish you would describe to us your ideal, Mr. Saville. We will promise you every sympathy.’

‘ First of all,’ answered Saville, laughingly, ‘ she must be very, very beautiful.’

‘ Of course,’ said Mrs. Jerningham, sarcastically. ‘ No man ever *imagined* a wife who was not a Venus.’

‘ And then, quite as important, if not more so, than her beauty, she must be clever—not obtrusively, conceitedly clever, but, rather,

that unconscious genius which sees and determines everything rightly without knowing it does anything better than others. She must, lastly, be loving and devoted, capable of sacrificing everything for the man she loves, and living only in him and for him. What do you think of my picture ?'

'A very pretty sentimental one, indeed,' answered Mrs. Jerningham : 'well enough in poetry and romance, but scarcely to be discovered out of those realms. Shall I tell you your fate, Mr. Saville ?'

He bowed his head gravely, in token of assent.

'You will meet some one very like your ideal, not exactly similar, for such perfection is impossible, but near enough to make you love her deeply, and—she will not love you in return.'

Saville flushed slightly. He was a proud man, and the insinuation that he could woo in vain touched his pride. Little did he think that these words, uttered in jest, would some day prove terribly true.

'You will prove a false prophet,' he said,

gaily. ‘Devotion such as mine will be, when I offer it, must win a return.’

‘Better live in the ideal altogether,’ said Mrs. Jerningham. ‘There we cannot be disappointed. All our idols there are golden; it is only when we descend to the real we find them compounded of common clay.’

‘Human nature cannot subsist upon it,’ answered Saville. ‘It is very beautiful, and bright, and fantastic, but we weary of it, as Tantalus was weary of being mocked by the tempting fruit that bloomed within his reach. Practical men want practical things.’

‘In addition to which,’ remarked Hammersley, joining for the first time since Saville’s entrance in the conversation, ‘I think if we could all meet with our ideal we should be very disappointed. Too much perfection is as distasteful as too little. We should be apt to find our perfect ideals too

“Faultily faultless, icily regular, splendidly null.”’

‘There spoke the practical lover,’ said Mrs. Jerningham, mockingly. ‘Mr. Hammersley is in love with a moving, breathing idol; Mr. Saville worships a dim, visionary deity. I

wonder which is the happier of the two—the realist or the dreamer ?'

Hammersley made some jesting answer, and Edith, watching from where she sat, surrounded now by several courtiers, observed her lover's careless talk and laughter with an angry, jealous pain gnawing at her proud heart, for in her eyes it seemed only to indicate one fact—that he was fonder of Mrs. Jerningham than her.

He joined her later on as she was preparing to leave.

‘Edith,’ he said, drawing her slightly aside, ‘there is no quarrel between us, is there ?’

A cold, hard look—a look, could he only have read it aright, as much of wounded affection as of wounded pride—came into her face as she answered—

‘No more than usual. You seldom contrive to leave very pleasant memories behind.’

I think there was something both in that look and tone which conveyed reproach, for he asked, more kindly—

‘I may come to see you to-morrow, may I not ?’

'If you please,' was the chilling answer.
And so they parted that night, neither
leaving very pleasant memories behind—he
thinking her unreasonable, she thinking him
unjust.





CHAPTER VI.

‘PARTED.’

EDITH and Hammersley made up their quarrel after a fashion. Alas! quarrelling and making up had become very frequent of late, so frequent that it was easy to foresee how soon the end must come.

It was patent to Saville, and he used his best efforts to induce Hammersley to initiate some line of conduct which could better keep peace between them; but although he promised, and tried to perform it to the best of his ability, a random insulting or sarcastic remark from Edith would scatter his good resolutions to the wind, and render him haughty and unyielding as ever.

It was at a ball given by the Countess of Carrick, the wife of Edith’s eldest brother,

that the final quarrel took place. Edith, as usual, was undisputed *belle* of the room, and when she entered there was the usual throng formed round her, and the usual competition for her hand in the ensuing dances. Her ordinary custom—an arrangement made between the two—was, if she chanced to come to any ball before Hammersley made his appearance, to reserve a certain portion of her programme for him. They had had a rather serious quarrel two or three days before, but she magnanimously resolved not to let this interfere with her usual proceeding, and accordingly reserved the accustomed number of vacancies on her card for her lover. To-night, however, he was so late that one of the dances kept for him had already gone by, and still there were no signs of his coming. Of course, such an apparent neglect on his part, when he knew she was sure to be there, increased the resentment of Edith’s sufficiently embittered feelings towards him. At that moment, when her vexation was at its height, she was joined by Rochester, who was her partner for the next dance.

This gentleman had still continued his friendly relations with her, for he knew sufficient of Edith's character to perceive that she was intensely proud. He had been well enough acquainted with Hammersley in Harrow schooldays to know that his pride was scarcely inferior to that of his betrothed; and he, therefore, indulged in a reasonable speculation that, with two such similar natures, it was extremely probable there would ultimately arise some quarrel sufficiently serious to result in a separation. Hammersley's being out of the way would naturally facilitate his chance. He had already contrived to drop several hints and inuendos about his proceedings with other women, the majority of which were purely his own invention; and although Edith pretended to appear indifferent at their recital, he was sufficiently judge of women to know that nothing galls their pride and lessens their love more than any symptoms of neglect in their lovers. Rochester was better than a great many of the men with whom he associated, insomuch as he possessed a heart

and some degree of conscience; and when he perceived Edith's ineffectual attempt to conceal her annoyance at his artfully-prepared insinuations, the latter smote him rather sharply, and forced him to think he was playing a mean and shabby part—that he was acting to a man as he would have considered it cowardly in a man to act towards him; but when these spasms of remorse were past, he generally consoled himself with that convenient but immoral maxim, ‘All is fair in love and war.’

They took their places in a quadrille. If a man wants to enjoy the gentlemanly process of vilifying his rival to the woman he loves, a quadrille is as convenient a place as possible for its indulgence.

‘Mr. Hammersley cannot evidently tear himself away from the opera,’ he said carelessly, looking, however, keenly at his partner to watch the effects of his words.

Edith flushed slightly, for at that moment her thoughts were straying in the direction of her absent lover.

‘Is he at the opera? How do you know?’ she asked.

Rochester secretly congratulated himself on this stroke. Hammersley had evidently never told her of his intention to go there, and at that omission she would naturally feel annoyed.

‘For the best of all reasons,’ answered Rochester: ‘I was there before I came here, and I saw him myself.’

To this Edith only responded a slight ‘Oh!’

Rochester was determined, however, not to suffer the conversation to be changed, so as soon as the exigencies of the figures would permit him he continued—

‘I should have thought you would have exhibited more interest in his movements. You never inquired whom he was with.’

Edith turned on him her beautiful hazel eyes with an assumed look of indifference she was far from feeling.

‘Really,’ she answered, with a haughty curl of her lip, ‘I don’t see that because Mr. Hammersley is my cousin it should be my duty to inquire the manner of his goings out

and his comings in, or the company he frequents. He is at liberty to choose for himself, I presume, in such matters, without being compelled to take me into his confidence.’

‘Would you be as indifferent to the husband’s movements as you are to those of the— Forgive me, Lady Edith, I was about to be impertinent, and assume what I do not know. Yet I think you will not deem me so, considering I am well aware what little regard you have for me, if I say that I can guess enough to make me wish I could stand, were it only for an hour, in Hammersley’s place.’

‘Mr. Rochester,’ she answered, uneasily, ‘is it generous of you to revive this topic, particularly,’ she added, with a forced smile, ‘in a quadrille, where I cannot possibly escape from you ? Let us forget what—forgive me for speaking so harshly—has been an illusion on your part.’

‘I don’t think I offend often, do I ?’ he asked, sadly. ‘I love you too deeply, too devotedly, not to comply with your slightest wish ; but you do not know the struggle I have sometimes to keep silence, when I think

how worthy in every respect one who enjoys the blessing of your love should prove himself.'

'Mr. Rochester,' said Edith, with dignity, 'you cannot advance your cause with me by hinting at the unworthiness of your rival. Whatever his faults and deficiencies, I am the best judge of them, and I will permit no third and interested person to interfere between us.'

True woman to the core! Edith, however indignant with him herself, would suffer no other to asperse him in his absence.

'Faults and deficiencies!' said Rochester, sneeringly—'they are patent enough. If he loved you, would he be absent for a moment when he knew you were here, much less would he waste the time that should be spent at your side in open flirtation with another woman?'

'With another woman!' echoed Edith, her pride succumbing for the moment to her curiosity.

'He dined to-day at the same house as Mrs. Jerningham, and in the evening he was at the opera in her box.'

I think if Rochester could have guessed the fierce pain that tightened round Edith's heart as he told her that, he would have suppressed it, even though it had the merit in his eyes of being a fact open to the observation of every one.

She had always looked upon Mrs. Jerningham as a rival, for no better reason than that which usually prompts sensitive women to form such a conclusion, namely, that she and Hammersley always seemed on easy, familiar terms of friendship when they met. To dine at a place on purpose to meet her—for, of course, he could have no motive in going except that—was bad enough, but to be so enamoured of her society that he must snatch the time which should be given to his betrothed to further enjoy it, was a thought that drove the proud Edith almost beside herself.

Rochester perceived the effect of his announcement, and wisely proceeded to change the conversation. But the mischief was done. Edith that night was ready to make any sacrifice by which she could hope to avenge her wounded dignity.

She had an opportunity presently of indulging her jealous anger. The Marquis of C—— entered and requested as many dances as she would give him. Generally speaking, he only got one, so numerous were the claims upon Edith ; but this night she had left four vacant places for Hammersley, one of which had already gone through his lateness. Her resolution was taken in an instant. She allowed the marquis to fill up two, and only kept one for her lover. She knew she could offer a man of his proud temperament no more deadly insult than this ; and, the moment after she had done it, something whispered to her that she had gone too far, but the next instant pride and resentment came to her aid, and she rejoiced in thinking she could wound him as deeply as he had wounded her.

A few moments after Hammersley entered from the opera. He had stayed there later than he meant, because it happened to be his favourite music, not from any special delight he experienced in Mrs. Jerningham's society ; and, unwitting of what had taken place in his absence, he crossed over quickly to Edith with

his usual question of ‘Have you kept my dances?’

Eager as she was to prevent herself from betraying the cause of her offence, she could not repress one lightning flash of her indignant hazel eyes, and her lip would curl scornfully as she answered, in a tone as indifferent as she could assume—

‘I scarcely expected you would be here to-night.’

The signs of vexation on the fair, proud face that he had learned to read pretty well by this time, were not lost upon him, but he was puzzled to understand how the fact of his being a little late could account for such unaccustomed coldness, and his voice was not in consequence pitched in the most conciliatory key as he said—

‘I don’t think you have had to charge me often with neglecting my engagements with you. Why should you be so particularly doubtful of my promise to-night?’

Perhaps, if she had told him the real reason, it might have led to an avowal of her dislike to Mrs. Jerningham, and then, by

the easy transition characteristic of lovers' explanations, to a more assured renewal of love and confidence. But Edith, unfortunately, was no adept at the 'soft answer that turneth away wrath.' Her genius lay rather in the opposite direction. She had a knack, peculiar to most proud and sensitive women, of converting a slight misunderstanding into a serious quarrel. Nothing could be more contemptuously indifferent than her manner, particularly to a man who was certainly in the dark as to the how and why of his offending, as she replied—

'Oh! I really don't know *why*; only you know yourself you are very inconsistent at times.'

Her lover's glance grew very cold and stern, as he gazed on the fair face—so very fair, even in its unreasoning anger—of the woman he loved so passionately.

'Edith,' he answered, coldly, 'I cannot affect to understand you. Your words and actions are so often riddles to me, that I can scarcely have any surprise left for fresh enigmas; but all this time, I beg to remind

you, that you have not thought fit to answer my question.’

‘Oh! your dances,’ she said, carelessly. ‘I have kept a waltz in case you came. I was so pestered by everyone, that I really could not keep any more; besides, truly, I did not expect you at all to-night, as it was so late.’

In spite of his habitual self-command, the hot, angry blood rose for an instant to his cheek as she told him this. It was a trifle perhaps, but the hopes and happiness of lovers are made up of trifles, and in all the quarrels—lately become so frequent—that had passed between them, he had never doubted her love so much as he did at that moment.

‘I ought to be grateful to you for that concession,’ he said, with a bitter sarcasm in his tone. ‘When there are so many other admirers with such greater claims to consideration ready to offer their homage, it is a great privilege for your future husband to be permitted *one* dance.’

He moved haughtily away when he had said this, and left Edith alone with her own reflections, whatever they might be. They

were not very pleasant, poor child ! if the truth could have been told. She had wounded her lover, but she had wounded herself as deeply ; for, where the love is mutual, we can rarely hope to deal death to the other's happiness without its being quickly followed by the suicide of our own.

Edith's hand was presently claimed by a gay guardsman, and Hammersley was soon apparently interested in a conversation with the fair and vivacious Countess of E—— ; but, in spite of his companion's colloquial talents, which were of no mean order, there was a dull pain at his heart which the most honied words of another were powerless to dispel. In that gay throng of society's most best and beautiful he saw but one face, he heard but one voice—the face that had looked on him so coldly, the voice that had wounded him so cruelly.

He watched her furtively, from time to time, amid the mazy circles of the dancers—watched to see if he could detect one shadow of remorse or repentance on her face that could reassure him of her love. No. She was

dancing as gaily and unconcernedly as if the breaking of hearts was too ordinary a pastime for her to trouble herself one moment about.

Unable any longer to sustain even the semblance of conversation, he rose and moved a little further away. At that moment Edith returned from the dance in which he had been watching her, and seated herself at a little distance from him, near enough, however, for him to overhear everything that was said.

Rochester was standing close by her, and just as he was about to make some remark the Marquis of C—— hurried up.

‘Lady Edith,’ he said, quickly, ‘I shall have to forego the pleasure of my two dances with you. My brother has been taken suddenly ill, and I have just received a message to come to him immediately.’ And, bidding her good-night, the marquis hurried away.

Mr. Rochester was not slow in profiting himself of the opportunity.

‘You have got two dances vacant now,’ he said, in his most persuasive tones. ‘Do give

them to me. Let me enjoy a piece of good fortune for once.'

Edith hesitated for a moment. Her loyalty to her lover was still strong, although he had so deeply offended her. Should she keep this one for him now? But then the thought flashed across her—suppose he was engaged for the very one she had kept for him? What a humiliation for her! Besides, had he not left her with upbraiding on his lips, when he ought to have sued to *her* for pardon? The next moment she suffered Rochester to inscribe his name in lieu of the departed marquis.

Hammersley had heard every word of this brief negotiation, and such a further proof of his betrothed's falseness confirmed his doubts. Come what might, he determined that night to have the truth from Edith, and if the truth was as he suspected, to renounce her for ever.

The next dance was the solitary waltz she had had the grace to keep for him. He made one final effort to avert the catastrophe he felt was impending.

'Edith,' he said, suddenly, in the midst of

the inspiring strains of the *Soldaten Lieder*, ‘there *must* have been some reason for your strange coldness to-night. Will you be frank and tell me? Better do so than let us misunderstand each other perhaps for the rest of our lives.’

There was a passionate eagerness in his voice that vibrated to the core of Edith’s heart, already longing, perhaps, to be reconciled again, had it not been for that stubborn pride which has broken so many hearts ere now.

‘Don’t worry so,’ she answered pettishly; ‘I have no reason to give.’

That chilling answer froze back all the tenderness in her lover’s breast. During the rest of the waltz he never uttered another word, but, at its conclusion, he led her into an adjoining room, which, from its isolated position, seemed especially made for confidential *tête-à-têtes*, and, dropping her arm, faced her with a hard, stern look—a look that boded ill for the result of their interview.

She knew by his face that the crisis was coming, but not for worlds would she, in her

present mood, have betrayed a wish to avert it. She stood the picture of haughty indifference. Supremely beautiful, with a rich, gorgeous beauty that time alone could rob of its magical charm, and hard, cold, and unlovable as she looked at that moment, his heart gave a great convulsive throb to think that, in a few minutes, such beauty might be nought to him save a bitter memory of what could have been.

‘Edith,’ he said at length, ‘we have, unfortunately, had too many quarrels—quarrels which may, perhaps, have wearied you of my society, and made my love seem distasteful. God knows, had it lain in my power to avert them, I would have done so, but I cannot, admit that all the fault has been on my side. This misunderstanding to-night is, nevertheless, much more serious than any that has arisen before. You can scarcely deny your coldness, yet you refuse to assign me the cause. I am left to find it for myself.’

He paused a moment, expecting some denial, or, at least, some explanation, but no answer came. Her slender fingers were

playing restlessly with the sticks of her fan, and her face was slightly turned away. He continued—

‘If I had never known you from childhood—if you had never confessed you loved me—if I had been a mere stranger, smitten with your beauty and offering my homage among the crowd of your other admirers—could it have been possible for me to mistake your indifference to-night, would it not have told me in unmistakable language that I could have never hoped to win your heart? Between us, situated as we are, it is different. I am your accepted lover—not recognised openly as such by the world, but your lover by virtue of the compact between our own hearts. Tell me, Edith, has your conduct to-night the same significance in our case that it would have had in the one I just quoted to you? Is it meant to tell me that our love has been a folly and a mistake, and that it must be ended now?’

The words were gentle enough, but the manner was very stern, and her proud nature revolted against even the semblance of dicta-

tion. Besides, had she not good cause to suspect his faith? What more probable than that the very lips which were accusing her now had an hour ago whispered the language of love to her rival? At that thought she hardened directly. The glance that met her betrothed's was hard and defiant.

‘As you choose,’ she answered. ‘You are at liberty to interpret it in which way you please.’

‘That means to say,’ he said, his eyes flashing with the anger it was almost impossible to repress, ‘it is a matter of perfect indifference to you whether we part or not.’

Oh, Edith! one moment of hesitation there—one word, one ambiguous phrase, that could have told him the truth of that wayward heart, and what an eternity of misery might have been spared to your two lives! As it was, she answered almost before her lover had finished the question—

‘Yes, it *is* a matter of total indifference.’

That reply, seemingly so sincere, as indeed it might have been in her then mood, stung

him more than any previous taunt. His face grew deadly pale, with the unconquerable emotion of wounded pride, and his voice sounded unutterably changed as he answered—

‘It is well at all events you have spoken the truth. I am thankful for the candour that has saved me from the curse of wedding a loveless bride. Henceforth, it shall be my task to despise and forget the folly that made me dream of our union as a possibility. Farewell, Lady Edith. When I remember you—which I trust may be seldom, for yours is not a memory that should cause one pang to a true man’s heart—it shall be as the pure-minded and generous girl, before the poisonous teachings of the world and the flattery of its most worthless worshippers converted you into a heartless and unlovable woman.’

He was gone, while the sound of his voice was still ringing in her ears ; gone, with bitter taunt and upbraiding on his lip, telling her that she was worthless and unworthy to be loved ; gone, without one sigh of regret to the memory of their buried love.

The emotion she had felt throughout that

interview and at its climax, emotion none the less deep because it was so carefully suppressed, was sufficient to have killed a woman in whom pride was a less dominant characteristic. Still, mistress of herself as she was, the keen eyes of Rochester detected something amiss as she re-entered the ball-room alone.

‘Lady Edith,’ he said, offering his arm, ‘unattended by even the humblest cavalier, and looking as pale as a ghost! Wherefore this extraordinary combination of circumstances?’

Edith’s sole answer was a short nervous laugh, so obviously forced that it stimulated her companion’s curiosity.

He regarded her gravely.

‘Forgive my impertinence in questioning you,’ he said; ‘but pardon me if I repeat—(His voice faltered skilfully here.) You are so very dear to me, that what affects your happiness must, by reflection, affect mine. Something unusual must have occurred to-night to produce a change in one (for the life of him he could not forego the paltry malice of indulging in a sneer) so generally superior to emotion.’

She scarcely observed his finishing sarcasm—at any rate, failed to understand or resent its meaning ; her thoughts were busy elsewhere. But at that moment it was pleasant to have a sympathetic listener ; so she answered, after a moment of hesitation, speaking quickly, as if ashamed of the confession of her weakness—

‘I have been a little annoyed just now.’

‘I can guess the cause,’ said Rochester. ‘I saw Hammersley lead you away with no particularly pleasant expression on his countenance. I presume the *tête-à-tête* was not in consequence remarkably agreeable.’

‘Remarkably disagreeable would be nearer a true description,’ answered Edith, with that same nervous laugh, which she trusted would convince her listener of her utter indifference to the event she was narrating.

‘Have you quarrelled seriously?’ he asked ; a great feeling of joy, that he scarcely dared as yet to acknowledge to himself, breaking over him at the hope that his powerful rival might have been effectually disposed of.

‘So very seriously,’ answered Edith, in an as unconcerned tone as she could assume,

‘that it is to be the last quarrel in which we are ever likely to indulge.’

‘You are parted, then?’ he said very quietly.

Edith’s only response was a rather indistinct ‘yes,’ and they both continued silent for some time. He was the first to speak.

‘And yet you love him still, I suppose?’ he asked. That question dispelled her reserve. After all there are moments when the proudest woman will expose her heart.

‘I *did* love him passionately,’ she answered; a strange, fierce, glittering light in her eyes—a light that made her companion rather fearful for the moment that the scene had turned her brain—‘so passionately, that if my death could have purchased his safety, I would have bade adieu to life cheerfully. I can scarcely say now whether I hate or love him. I think it must be hate, because he taunted me bitterly when he left. But *this* I can tell you for certain, that if, by pronouncing one word, I could bring him back to my feet, I would sooner cut out my tongue than utter it.’

It was a strange, inexplicable speech; rather

incomprehensible, even to Mr. Rochester, whose experience in female psychology had been by no means limited. But with this, as a practical philosopher, he did not care to meddle. His object was to win her for himself.

‘Since it is all over between you,’ he said—‘at least, I suppose I understand your nature sufficiently well to predict you will never be reconciled?’

‘*Never!*’ said, or rather sibilated, Edith from between her firm, white teeth, ‘*never!*’

‘Since, then, it is all over between you,’ he continued, ‘is it possible that I may have any hopes?’

‘Mr. Rochester,’ she replied, gravely, ‘the reply I gave to that question some time ago must be my answer now. I like and respect you as a friend, but there can be nothing further between us.’

‘Do you intend to keep so faithful to his memory?’ he inquired, sneeringly.

‘Do I look like the broken-hearted damsel we read of in romances?’ she answered, with a more natural smile than she had yet worn.

Then, speaking more seriously: 'No, I do not intend to remain single all my life. Wearing the willow is not my *rôle*. I shall marry some day—make a highly desirable match, from a worldly and every other point of view, and settle down into the typical British matron.'

'You dislike me so that the thought of our union is hateful to you,' he said, sadly.

'If I married you,' she answered, with a sudden resumption of passionate earnestness in her voice, 'you are so connected with the events of this hideous night, that I could never exorcise the demon of memory from my life. Had you not told me what you did to-night we should never have parted. When I marry, I must have new scenes—a new existence—to make me forget the past. With you, yourself would be a living witness of all I strove to bury in oblivion.'

'Lady Edith,' he answered, his pride roused by this time, 'I will never trouble you on this subject again. I perceive too plainly I can never hope to be anything to you. The lover is buried—may I hope to be still your

friend. Believe me, I will prove a true one. I will even so far forget my own interests as to do all I can to bring about your happiness with my rival.’

‘I accept your friendship,’ she said, touched by his earnestness. ‘For your generous offer I thank you, but it cannot be. I have been frank with you to-night: forget, if you can, that Edith Stewart confided to you the secret of her heart, as I will try to forget I ever had one to confide. Henceforth it is not strange if other people find me really what *he* called me to-night—heartless and unlovable.’

There was the faintest possible quiver in her voice as she said this, but she suppressed it instantly, and for the rest of the evening it would have required a close observer to have remarked that she was less gay and animated than usual.

There is something very noble, after all, in men or women who bear their burden uncomplainingly and unsuspected of the world. Who can refuse his meed of admiration to that noble picture which Aytoun has given us of the stern widow of the murdered M‘Gregor,

whose tribute to the dead is not the tears and sobs which the weak daughters of Clanronald weep over their slaughtered kin, but the burning, passionate words which promise a deep and deadly revenge on the false Southron.

Hammersley had left Lady Carrick's immediately after his parting with Edith. On his way home he passed Saville's lodgings, and saw his brougham waiting at the door. For a moment his impulse was to go in, but, on second thoughts, he resolved to wait till the morning for the unpleasant news that he had to communicate.





CHAPTER VII.

‘A FRIEND IN NEED.’

SAVILLE had arrived at the Countess of Carrick’s a short time after Hammersley had left, and was surprised not to find his friend there. He called on him the next morning, and found him just concluding breakfast. Salutations over, he inquired the reason of his early departure the night before.

It was rather painful to enter into explanations, but it might as well come first as last. Besides, he was sure of Saville’s sympathy.

‘My dear fellow,’ he said, shrugging his shoulders, ‘you know pretty well by now who is the general controller of my movements. My departure last night was to be traced to the agency of that ornament to the *beau monde*, Lady Edith Stewart.’

Now that his friend regarded him more closely, he detected something rather unusual in his appearance and manner. There was the evidence of a sleepless night in his eyes, a marked change in his voice.

‘Another quarrel, I suppose?’ he questioned, briefly.

‘Another quarrel,’ repeated Hammersley, rising and taking a cigar, which he lighted and smoked at rapidly with quick, deep pulls. It is an unpleasant thing exposing one’s heart even to the most intimate friend.

‘More serious than usual?’ again questioned his friend.

Hammersley took a meditative pull, and then, holding the cigar at arm’s length, examined it critically, as if his whole attention were absorbed by the little brown weed. This assumed indifference did not deceive Saville ; he became rather impatient of such dissimulation.

‘Come, Hammersley,’ he said, ‘don’t try to persuade me that you don’t care a straw for what happened last night. Your acting is a little too forced to deceive me. It might

succeed perhaps with people who don’t know you so well as I. Let me hear the whole truth—the why, the when, the how.’

‘ My acting is rather forced, is it?’ answered Hammersley, with an uneasy laugh. ‘ You want to hear the whole truth. Well, then, listen. Last night, Edith Stewart and I parted for ever. How do I look this morning—like a broken-hearted, miserable wretch, or like a man who has enough good sense in him to hold a woman’s love at what it is worth, and to regard a woman’s faithlessness as a normal condition of her nature? Come, Saville, you are a keen observer, which of the two pictures is my portrait?’ He had thrown away his cigar as he said this, and was looking at his companion with grave, moody eyes, and a half-sarcastic, half-mournful smile upon his lips.

Saville paused a moment before he answered; then he said—

‘ If it be true that you and Edith Stewart have parted for ever, I think I know your love for her well enough to predict that, however you may be able to mask your grief from the

eyes of others, it will be long ere you succeed in banishing her image from your heart.'

' You are right, Saville,' he answered. ' You are superior to the shallow idiots who make a science of suspicion, and know nothing, after all, of the nature they pretend to gauge. You can read a man's heart through the mask that pride puts on in hope to shield it from the prying eyes of the curious world. I suppose we all have, or have had in our lives, a fond dream that it was death to shatter. I have had mine, and it was shattered when we parted last night.'

He buried his face in his hands, and went on speaking slowly, more like a man talking to himself than addressing another :

' A man's whole life and happiness blighted by a little word of one woman ! How ridiculous and unmeaning it sounds ! Why, out of the millions upon earth, should *one* creature have the power given her to blast and destroy the existence of another ? Are there no other eyes as bright, no other lips as soft, as those of our "love's young dream ?" I wonder if a

new passion will ever bring me a Lethe for the old love.'

Saville was perplexed for an answer. The disappointment of lovers was a malady for which he had never yet found himself obliged to prescribe a remedy. But before he could invent one Hammersley answered his own question.

'No, no,' he said, speaking more quickly and energetically, as if the thought of a future love stung him bitterly; 'I could never renew that dream. The freshness of the first emotions, the virginity of the heart, are fled for ever. I may gaze again into glorious eyes, I may kiss again ruby lips, but in the glance there will be no rapture, in the kiss no passion.'

He ceased, and, removing his hands from his face, addressed his friend with a smile.

'I beg your pardon, Saville,' he said. 'It is too bad of me making you listen to my maudlin commonplaces, and trusting to your good-nature not to interrupt me. But lovers, as you will discover if you have to do with many more of them, are a tiresome and weary-

ing race. Let us talk of other matters than my misfortunes.'

'I would rather talk of them,' answered Saville, earnestly.

'Are you really interested? What possible attraction can you find in the recital of my woes? You have never been in love yourself.'

'Oh, yes, I have,' said Saville, smiling; 'in love with an ideal all my life, which some day I hope to find realised; and, therefore, I have the greatest sympathy for you.'

'Thanks very much. Sympathy is not such a bad medicine, I begin to think—a kind of tonic for the miserable, which braces them up for a bit into a kind of artificial cheerfulness, subsiding as soon as the dose is forgotten to be repeated. But, seriously, what is there to discuss? We have parted—I am unhappy—she is probably happy. Such are the facts of the case. What possible consolation can you hope to extract from these uncompromising materials?'

'*We have parted!*' echoed Saville incredulously. 'You speak as if the decisions of two

angry, hot-headed lovers were as unalterable as the laws of the Medes and Persians. I wonder how many married couples, enjoying the utmost domestic felicity at the present moment, have not frequently undergone that harrowing performance known in lover’s phraseology as “parting.”

‘ We were not hot-headed, nor even angry over it ; on the contrary, exceedingly cool and business-like. I put it to her whether it was a matter of total indifference if we parted or not ; and she answered it was, without a vestige of malice or pique in her voice or manner.’

‘ That is to say, because she did not storm and rave, and denounce, but conducted herself like a well-bred young woman, you come to the conclusion that she was not angry. Girls of Edith’s stamp, let me tell you, are most angry when they appear most cold.’

‘ But, granting I admit that, Saville, would any woman who loved a man ever so little suffer him to leave her, when one word from her could make it up between them ? ’

‘ Girls like Edith, I repeat, would do pre-

cisely the opposite to what sensible people like you and I would. Biting off the nose to avenge the face is an operation that affords them the greatest satisfaction. If you will relate to me the beginning of this *embroglio*, I will undertake to prove to you that every item of her conduct is in strict accordance with our preconceived notions of her character.'

Thus urged, Hammersley told him all that he knew. At the conclusion Saville was radiant.

'Nothing is clearer,' he exclaimed, triumphantly: 'you come to the ball late—you offer no apology—Edith naturally imagines someone else was the attraction—she is too proud to say so, but takes the only revenge in her power by pretending indifference to your society, in the same manner as you have shown indifference to hers—you are annoyed, and tell her so—she has not yet recovered her temper—she makes no attempts at reconciliation—you wax angrier—say hard things—this, joined to the previous wrong, inflames her more—you, exasperated, hint at parting—she keeps up the farce—and you both part—

loving each other all the while, and each fully convinced that the other does not care a straw. Does that seem clear ?'

'I am afraid not,' answered Hammersley, shaking his head sadly. 'It sounds plausible; but I know Edith Stewart better than you.'

'Lovers, as a general rule, know the least of each other,' said Saville, coolly. 'It is the mutual friend, like myself, who has got some wits left, who can see through it all. If you leave it in my hands, I will engage to bring you together again.'

'No,' cried Hammersley, proudly; 'I will not humiliate myself by *begging* her to return.'

'What humiliation is there in it ? You won't appear at all. I am the good fairy who is to arrange everything. Trust to my diplomacy. I will not compromise her pride or yours in the negotiation.'

Hammersley paused a moment, the temptation was so strong. Saville went up to him and put his hands on his shoulders.

'Tell the truth, man,' he said. 'You love Edith Stewart to distraction—she loves you.

You shake your head, but I am sure of it. Which is best, to waste your life in vain regret and repining, or to swallow your pride for once, and receive happiness in exchange? Now, which is your decision?'

'If,' answered Hammersley, hesitatingly, 'if you could contrive to let her know I should be glad of a reconciliation without letting her see that I was too eager for it—you understand me, Saville?'

'Most fully,' returned his friend, smiling. 'Your *amour-propre* shall be respected in my hands. Lady Edith will be at the Countess of G——'s to-night. I will take an opportunity to open my mission there. Don't you think it would be as well if you put in an appearance? It might suggest that you could not keep away from her presence, &c., &c., and have a good effect.'

'No; I don't think I will come,' said Hammersley, a slight flush suffusing his cheek. 'The fact of it is, she might be flirting desperately with some one else, and I could not stand that. You see, it will take me a little

time to accustom myself to remember that I have no control over her now.’

‘Very well,’ answered Saville. ‘Where shall I see you to-night to report on the result?’

‘Here as well as anywhere,’ was the reply; and for the present that subject was concluded between them.





CHAPTER VIII.

‘FAILURE.’

THE drama of human life goes on pretty much the same whatever the private trials and troubles of the actors concerned therein. The curtain draws up and finds most of them at their respective posts ; though we can scarcely guess the anguish of some obliged to present themselves there.

With smiling lip and aching heart, Edith Stewart played her character of fascinating beauty at the Countess of G——’s the next night. The usual crowd of worshippers poured their dull flatteries and whispered their conventional nothings ; but more than one pair of keen eyes noticed the look of abstraction and weariness that would occasionally creep

over the fair face, even as she received, to surfeiting, that which is most dear to every woman’s heart—unqualified admiration.

Saville entered later. He took little enjoyment in these gatherings of the *beau-monde*, this empty glare and glitter of fashion, in which the jaded votaries of pleasure find compensation for the uselessness of their lives. But even the wisest of men occasionally come into contact with what they despise. Moreover, he was not cynical enough to wholly despise human nature, he rather compassionated it ; and he found it much the same in every rank, except, perhaps, in the upper circles, where it had a little more gloss than elsewhere.

He took advantage of a temporary vacuum in the region of Edith’s admirers to approach the young beauty. Saville, on the whole, was rather a favourite of hers ; in fact, he was well-established in the good graces of the fair sex altogether. Although undeniably handsome, he had never condescended to the petty arts or vanities of the typical ‘beauty’ man.’ He seldom complimented, and never flattered ;

but there was an innate chivalry and tenderness in his manner, either in addressing or speaking of women, that enabled these instinctive judges of character to discern those natural qualities which the professed ‘ladies’ man more often simulates than possesses.

‘Lady Edith,’ he said, with a winning smile, ‘I know I am asking a great favour, and I don’t doubt I shall create a hundred and one enemies by your granting it. Will you give me five minutes’ confidential conversation, as I have something important to communicate?’

She bowed her head in acquiescence, and, rising, took his arm. They ensconced themselves in a situation sufficiently retired to prevent their conversation being intruded on. Edith guessed well enough the nature of his communication, and the workings of her heart at that moment would have been a study for the most learned in soul anatomy.

Saville was slightly embarrassed at first, but the interest he took in his mission soon restored his customary self-possession.

‘It is a delicate subject, perhaps, on which

I am about to enter,’ he said in a low voice ; ‘ but my friendship for your cousin, and my concern for his future happiness, must be my excuse. I am not guilty of exaggeration, Lady Edith, when I say that that happiness is in your hands. I have seen him this morning, and much as his pride would have made him conceal his disappointment before the eyes of another, even of his most intimate friend, I was keen enough to penetrate the mask and discover how deeply he felt. I questioned him, with some difficulty at first, it is true, but ultimately I obtained a full explanation of your quarrel. Am I not right in saying there has been misunderstanding on both sides ? ’

Edith was silent. Could she confess the real origin of the quarrel—her suspicions of Mrs. Jerningham ? She could scarcely confess them to herself, certainly not to a comparative stranger. Saville took her silence for assent, and continued—

‘ In all these quarrels,’ he said easily, ‘ misinterpretations arise, anger usurps the place of reason, and analyses in a rough and rude

fashion. I am no stranger to the depth or the long duration of Hammersley's love for you. May I hope, Lady Edith, that I may be the means of reconciling hearts that should never have been severed ?'

Oh ! how Edith's heart throbbed at that question ! Her destiny was in her own hands, to decide by one little word. What wonder if, for a moment, old sweet memories of the past came flooding upon her—if for a moment she dared to long for the touch of a 'vanished hand,' for the 'sound of a voice' that her own lips had forbade to address her again ? But, then, as swiftly following in the wake of those purer emotions came that which was the curse and shipwreck of her life—the stubborn pride which tempted even the high natures of heaven to rebellion.

She put her chance of happiness from her, calmly and deliberately as it seemed to her amazed listener, only he did not comprehend the frenzy and insanity of that indomitable pride, mingling with love, which compelled her to sacrifice her happiness to the devouring Moloch she had created. There did come a

time when Saville learned what love was, and found it akin to madness.

‘Mr. Saville,’ she answered, clearly and distinctly—acute as were her listener’s ears he could not detect a tremor in her voice—‘I thank you sincerely for the kindness which has prompted you to assume the ungrateful office of mediator between my cousin and me. But I have taken my determination, and I announce it to you, calmly and deliberately, without the least admixture of momentary pique or anger that would excite any hope of my subsequently recalling it—henceforth, Frederick Hammersley and I can be nothing to each other.’

Saville was fairly surprised. His knowledge of the female character had been pretty extensive, both theoretically and practically, but the inscrutable calm of this young girl completely baffled him. He looked at her long and steadily to see if one movement of the impassive features would give him a clue to the enigma of her conduct, but they betrayed nothing to his gaze. When he spoke there was a ring of resentment in his voice.

‘And this,’ he said, forgetting in his anger how he had promised not to compromise his friend’s pride, ‘is the message I must take back to your cousin! He awaits me to-night, with his heart full of love, and yearning for the words that shall tell him he has not loved in vain. Must I say to him instead those words which will break it? If you have one spark of love left for him, can you—could any woman who still retains her sex’s feelings within her—consign him to such a future?’

The language of reproach or accusation was the worst one to hold to Edith.

‘Mr. Saville,’ she said, haughtily, ‘if my cousin sent you here to seek my forgiveness, I know enough of him to be sure that he would not entrust a comparative stranger with the duty of reproaching me in case of failure. Allow me to remind you that a third party can know little of the rights of a quarrel save from the persons concerned. You have not yet heard my story, and, without the key which that could afford you, you must be content to let my conduct remain inexplicable. Any interpretation you put upon it will,

doubtless, be far from a real solution of the mystery.’

Saville was not easily abashed, and he had enjoyed considerable practice in colloquial encounters, but the energetic language of the haughty beauty proved rather exacting to his powers of reply.

‘Since I have had the misfortune to offend you,’ he answered, coldly, ‘we will conclude this interview. I would not do so yet were there the least chance of accomplishing the mission on which I came to-night; but that seems at present impossible.’

‘Utterly impossible, either now or at any future time,’ said Edith, firmly.

With this conclusive rejoinder, Saville escorted her back, and left the Countess of G——’s, after lingering a little while to ponder over his interview; then took his way rather dispiritedly to the apartments of his friend.

Hammersley was awaiting him, and endeavouring to elude the feelings of suspense by steady application to a meerschaum, from which he sent forth great clouds into the night.

The face of Saville, as he presented himself at the door, was sufficient announcement.

‘A failure?’ he questioned, very briefly, of his friend.

A slight bend of the head confirmed the truth of his surmise.

‘Did I not tell you I knew Edith Stewart better than you?’ he asked presently. ‘But, at any rate, let me have the particulars of the interview.’

Saville told him all. At the conclusion he said—

‘I am afraid I bungled it a little by letting my temper get the best of me, but, really, she was so cold-blooded that restraint was out of the question.’

‘You are right,’ returned Hammersley; ‘she is cold-blooded. The world has turned her into an emotionless woman, and yet what a darling child she was!’

They remained silent for some moments. At last Hammersley spoke—

‘I shall go abroad in a few days. Three or four months among other scenes and other people will cure me of this folly. I suppose

one can’t regret for ever. Every wound will heal with time.’

‘It is the best plan,’ answered Saville; ‘and, if you like, I will accompany you. I am rather weary of London, and the mob that calls itself society. We will go together, and seek something nobler and more faithful than the loves of worldly girls.’

Hammersley’s eyes brightened at the prospect. He grasped Saville’s hand warmly.

‘Thanks—a thousand thanks!’ he said. ‘I did not like to ask you, for I thought you might object to be burdened with a love-sick comrade; but I promise you I won’t intrude my woes upon you. Whenever I feel particularly retrospective, I will retire into my own apartment and have the fit out.’

So it was arranged between them they should start in a week. Hammersley wrote a farewell letter to the Marchioness of Allerton, explaining why he did not come to her house to bid her good-bye, and had an interview with his father, who offered him consolation after the fashion of parents who are secretly rejoiced at the circumstance they

are called upon to deplore ; and next day he and Saville turned their backs upon the gay metropolis for a season.

‘ My dear boy,’ said the latter, philosophically, as they paced the platform for a few minutes before the train started, ‘ we must all have some facer once in our life. On the whole, I think, considering it is bound to come some time, you are more fortunate in having it now and getting over it young, than in waiting uncomfortably in continual expectation.’

‘ Getting over it is the principal thing,’ returned Hammersley, with a rather sad smile. ‘ If we are all our lifetime accomplishing that, the later it comes the better. At any rate, I have one comfort left—

“ Whate’er betides, I’ve known the worst.”’

At that moment the bell rang, and in another few minutes the train steamed out of the station with its human cargo. But few, I think, bore a heavier heart on that long journey than the man who was turning his face from all he loved so well.



CHAPTER IX.

‘A YEAR AFTER.’

IF a jury of match-making matrons had been impanelled to solemnly declare the most eligible *parti* in England for their marriageable daughters, I think they would have unanimously returned a verdict in favour of the Earl of Ardross.

The reasons for giving this gentleman the preference were considerable. To begin with, he was fabulously wealthy; the extent of his possessions was almost beyond the reach of ordinary arithmetic. Not one of his numerous female friends had ever ventured to describe his income in figures, for fear of falling far short of the veritable total. His chief residence, or rather what had been the chief residence of the former earls—for him-

self, he preferred a less pretentious domicile in the North of England—was the annual resort of pilgrims from all parts of the British dominions, who considered that their tourist education would be wofully defective if they had not contemplated the beauties and splendours of Ardross Abbey. His capital was practically inexhaustible, for his father had died when he was six months old, and from then till he was twenty-one his revenues had been invested in various and most lucrative channels.

But the young earl had other recommendations besides the wealth, which of itself was sufficient to place him beyond the reach of rivalry. He was good-looking. Mothers, in speaking of him to their daughters, pardonably exaggerated this into handsome. He had a magnificent figure, with the thews and sinews of an athlete. He was a mighty rider across country—a crack shot—he could handle a bat with most amateurs—could take a turn at the gloves with a professional, and compel that worthy to exert himself considerably to come off best in the encounter. He had been

captain of the Eton Eight, and had rowed stroke in the Oxford boat in the year when the light-blue collapsed so utterly before its powerful rival. Take him all in all, Guy, Earl of Ardross, was a man on whom Fortune had lavished many gifts. There was only one thing needed to complete his happiness ; that item was—a wife.

It was through no want of attention on the part of his numerous female friends and acquaintances that he had not procured this blessing up to the present time. He was regarded as the lawful prey of every match-making mother in the three kingdoms. He was the big fish at whom every well-brought-up young maiden was instructed to throw her line. Beautiful girls, fascinating girls, strong-minded girls, fascinating widows, had all had a fling at him ; but still the stout heart of the mighty earl succumbed not to the feminine batteries so incessantly directed against it.

For the last year he had been roaming on the Continent, accompanied by a friend. Perhaps his main object in travelling was to obtain a brief respite from matrimonial per-

secution. He could scarcely hope to secure that anywhere. His reputation had preceded him in every European capital. The society of Paris, Vienna, Berlin, received the distinguished young foreigner with open arms. Not a few married ladies were perfectly willing to enter into negotiations with him on their own account ; and at last he came to the conclusion that, since fate had precluded him from enjoying anything like peace in this world, he might as well be victimised in his own land as anywhere else. Accordingly, he turned his steps towards England.

Great was the rejoicing in Belgravian mansions when this cheerful news reached the ears of the wary mothers, who were ever on the watch for their beloved young. Deeper grew the whisperings of anxious relations ; more carefully was mapped out the campaign of each matrimonial general, as the days rapidly sped by that were to bring the Earl of Ardross back to his native shores.

He had reached the mature age—at least, for such an eligible *parti*—of twenty-five. During the years that his sayings and doings

had been the property of the world, even scandal, usually no respecter of persons, had been very lenient with his name. He was scarcely credited with the ordinary follies and vices of youth. Certainly, it was known that he had supported two of the most noted members of the *demi-monde* in the first years of his career ; but then, as it was charitably urged, a young man of his enormous wealth must get rid of it somehow, and the only wonder, among even the most austere, was that he had contented himself with two. Such temperance was rare, very rare, among the fashionable youth of the day. By all means, permit the young earl to enjoy the benefit of his abstemiousness in a better reputation than his fellows.

At length the time arrived when the utmost efforts of interested rivals could not prevent him from meeting Edith Stewart. Malicious eyes darted covert glances of hatred—angry hands rattled fans to conceal the agitation on maternal countenances—when they saw the young beauty receive with her sweetest smile the compliments of the hitherto unconquered

earl. An awful, undefinable presentiment seemed to pervade the hungry crowd of fishers for the broad lands of Ardross, that the fascinating daughter of the house of Allerton was destined to carry off the prize for which they had wrangled so keenly among themselves. That night the earl was assiduous in his attentions. Those who were interested—and their name was legion—watched with sickening anxiety a gleam of tenderness in the great brown eyes when they turned towards Edith, which the utmost attention on the part of others had never awakened. Time seemed to confirm the infatuation, and, when the earl was reported among the visitors at Allerton, the most sanguine of mothers looked upon her chance as hopeless.

What Edith's feelings upon the subject really were it is perhaps difficult to say. Ordinary young ladies, with well-trained affections, would, of course, have considered it impossible that any woman could help being in love with the Earl of Ardross, if he proposed to her. If a pleasing face and person, with heaven knows how many thousands a

year, could not command affection, what, in the name of common—I mean *worldly*—sense, could? One thing, at any rate, was certain—she treated him with more courtesy than she was wont to exhibit to the rest of her admirers. Whether it was really a second love, or a mere liking, or, perhaps, a gratification of female vanity in securing the splendid matrimonial prize for which there had been such desperate competition, is a problem that, perhaps, she could scarcely answer satisfactorily to herself.

The earl went down to Allerton with a settled purpose: that was, to propose. But, in cases where a certain conventionality has surrounded the actors in their love affairs, where every word and action has been more or less guarded, in order to escape the inquisitiveness of the world, this proposing is easier said than done. Besides, the poor man had really not enjoyed much experience among the women of his own class. It was like playing with edged tools to flirt with any of those young damsels on whose backs the matrimonial ticket was so legibly inscribed.

For him there had been no whispered compliments, no soft pressures of the hand, none of those little attentions which, whatever the gratification they afford at the time to the recipient, are never, in ordinary cases, construed into a serious meaning. The Earl of Ardross had been compelled, for his own safety, to leave such innocent, yet withal not unpleasing, pastime to those more fortunate of his male acquaintance who were not encumbered with an ancient title and a fabulous fortune, and were consequently objects of no solicitude to the select phalanx of manœuvring mothers.

He had hung back rather longer than he had intended, because the *rôle* of lover was so new to him ; but when he went down to Allerton he determined that few days should elapse before he had screwed up his courage to the sticking-point, and asked Edith Stewart to be his wife.

Fortune, who ever favours the resolute, smiled on him the third morning of his arrival, by directing his steps to the library, where Edith was sitting alone, engaged in the

perusal of one of the romances of the day. He had not expected to find her there, and this sudden encounter rather took him aback, for, although his nerves were strong enough on ordinary occasions, that blind little god—Love—somehow contrives to make poor weak mortals of the strongest of us at times.

Edith, on seeing him enter, put down her novel, and the earl stammered some rather unintelligible apology for disturbing her. It was really pitiable to see a fellow of his great thews and sinews so confounded before this slight, fragile girl.

‘Pray come in,’ she said, with a rather mischievous twinkle in her eye, for his embarrassment was obvious to her, and she was woman enough to enjoy her triumph. ‘You are not disturbing me in the least; on the contrary, I should be very glad if you would take compassion on me with a long chat. Reading gets very slow after a little while—does it not?’

This was a general proposition to which Ardross, in spite of his affection, did not feel

bound to commit himself. He, therefore, compromised.

‘Perhaps,’ he remarked dubiously, ‘your book was not very interesting.’

‘I don’t know,’ she answered carelessly; ‘my sister Florence raves on it, I believe; goes into ecstasies over the heroic portion, and dissolves into tears at the sentimental. I confess it has not affected me to either extreme.’

‘You must be difficult to please,’ said Ardross. He was not great at small-talk with erratic-minded young ladies like Edith. The women from whom he had hitherto endured such persecution had been of rather a commonplace nature and intellect, and conversation had flowed evenly and monotonously along. He began to fear this interview would tax his powers considerably.

‘You are right,’ she replied, with a merry laugh, that served to render her absolutely bewitching in the eyes of her adorer—‘you are right, Lord Ardross. I daresay you may have heard me called eccentric and wayward by many people. Do you know, I believe I

betray all this in my manner. I am such a strange girl, I cannot be pleased with the ordinary things that give delight to most women brought up in the world. Their definition of happiness seems to be a splendid income—a magnificent house—continual festivities. Now, these don’t constitute happiness at all in my idea.’

‘And how would you define it then?’ asked the earl, gravely. These last sensible remarks pleased him. He had been surfeited so with riches, and worshipped so on their account, that he began to despise them a little himself.

‘Oh, I scarcely know,’ answered Edith, with a slight blush. ‘I fear I am too romantic and fairy-dreaming for this world. I could be very happy in a bright little home—not very poor, you know—I don’t think I am fitted quite for poverty—but just comfortable, with (here the blush grew deeper) a few friends who loved me, and whom I could love.’

‘You must have friends?’ he inquired, tenderly. He felt he was coming very near the point.

‘Of course,’ said Edith, laughingly. ‘You would not have me live all by my poor miserable self, would you?’

He drew his seat closer.

‘Not if I could help it,’ he said, very meaningly.

Edith blushed anew, and kept her eyes steadfastly fixed on the pattern of the carpet which adorned her father’s library. The earl had got so far—he was thinking how he should get further. Presently he proceeded :

‘Edith,’ he said, taking her hand—he had heard of this being done on such occasions, and thought it might prove the beginning of a good understanding—‘I cannot tell you how I admire all that you have just spoken. It is such a relief to find some honourable sentiments left among the women, whose good instincts the world does its best to taint. But it is not alone for this I love you : I have loved you from the first moment I saw you. You said, just now, you must have friends about you who must be dear to you. Will you let me be one of those friends—will

you let me be the dearest? Edith, will you be my wife?’

He spoke it very gently and very tenderly. It was not the passionate wooing to which every fibre of her heart had throbbed in the days gone by, but there was a ring of manliness, of sincerity, in his pleading. She scarcely thought herself right in throwing away such a love.

She raised her head, and looked for a moment into the earnest eyes bent upon her face.

‘I will,’ was all she answered, in a low voice, and then she bent her head down once more.

On this acceptance of his suit, the Earl of Ardross ought decidedly, according to all precedent on such occasions, to have kissed his betrothed; but, as I have hinted before, he was not a very audacious lover, and, moreover, there was a grave expression on Edith’s countenance that did not seem provocative of kissing. However, he considered this as the usual line of conduct adopted by young ladies under the same circumstances, and was con-

sequently in no wise mortified to find his rapture unreciprocated.

‘My darling,’ he said gently, ‘you shall never repent your choice, if I can help it. I will do my best to make your life happy and contented.’

She freed herself from the arm which he had rather timidly insinuated round her waist, and faced him with a strange, restless look in her dark, speaking eyes.

‘Listen to me, Lord Ardross,’ she said, quickly. ‘I will marry you because I like you—because I think you good, and brave, and honourable—because I am sure you will make a kind and indulgent husband to the woman you love. You believe me, do you not?’

The earl was a little astonished by this burst, but he thought it best to say ‘yes.’

‘And if,’ she continued, quickly, ‘if it should ever reach your ears that people—tittle-tattling, scandal-mongering women or envious girls—have said I married you for your title and wealth, you will not believe it; and if, at any time, we should have a quarrel

or disagreement, you will not let that enter your thoughts to embitter your heart against me, will you?’

She waited with a kind of feverish anxiety for his answer, as if it would lift a load off her. She had not to wait long.

‘Of course not, my darling,’ he said, very earnestly. ‘Have I not your word for it? And I would sooner believe in that simple word than in the oaths of the rest of the world. Will that content you, Edith?’

‘You are very good and kind to me,’ she answered, in a low voice; ‘I will do my best to make you happy too.’

Emboldened by this, the earl brought his lips to those of Edith and gave her his first kiss. She did not shrink from it, although, perhaps, at that moment her thoughts were wandering far away from him who gave it.

‘And now, darling,’ he said, when he had finished the caress—very sweet it was to him, for she was the first woman he had ever loved—‘I will break the news to your father. Will you tell Lady Allerton?’

A bend of the head was Edith’s answer,

and, in a few moments, the earl left to seek the marquis.

Left to herself, Edith walked slowly to the window, from whence a magnificent view of the park was to be obtained. The window itself opened on to a terrace, at the right-hand side end of which, close to the library, was fashioned a small arbour. Edith walked to it and sat down on the seat inside, the same grave, rather weary look upon her face. As her eyes wandered restlessly round they rested at length on some letters engraven on the nearly worn-out wood post that formed the entrance to the arbour. What she saw was the figure of a heart, evidently rudely cut out with a penknife, and the letters 'F. E.' entwined together. They were almost illegible, and another person would not have taken the trouble to decipher them.

But she knew them well, and at that sight a flood-tide of bitter memories came rushing over her. How she remembered that calm summer evening, in that very arbour, when Hammersley had asked her the same question that the Earl of Ardross had asked her a few

minutes ago! How she had recollected him saying, when he had finished carving their names, ‘Nothing in this world shall ever part us, shall it, my darling?’ And her answer had been, ‘I will be true to you all the days of my life !’

O God! how had she kept that solemn promise, which she made with the bright stars of heaven shining down as witnesses of her vow, with her eager lips clinging to his in mute confirmation of the passionate love with which her heart was full? How could she hope for peace with another man when those dumb accusing letters, carved long ago, were fronting her with the reproach that she had destroyed, not only her own happiness, but that of him whose life was bound up in her love ?

At that hour the hearts of many would have been filled with envy at the good fortune of the betrothed to the Earl of Ardross. Could they have seen her a few moments after he had left her, her bosom heaving with passionate sobs—could they have read in that broken heart the remorse

which came too late to give her happiness—I think they would not have purchased even a coronet at the expense of such misery.

Lord Allerton's consent was easily obtained. He was not a man who troubled himself much about domestic matters. He left those to the care of his wife, while he looked, or fancied he looked, after the affairs of his country. As the marchioness had suspected for some time the direction events were taking, and had duly communicated her suspicions to her husband, he guessed Lord Ardross's errand immediately, and accorded him a most satisfactory interview.

Edith shortly afterwards communicated the news to her mother, in a more business-like way than that in which most young girls confide such an interesting secret to their mammas; and Lady Allerton did not trouble her with any questions. She guessed pretty well that it was no deep love which had dictated her acceptance of the earl's offer, and in such a case the least said the better. Perhaps, in her own heart, she would still have preferred her nephew as a son-in-law,

for, being brought up so long in her home, she had grown to love him almost as one of her own children. But the reticence of Edith, whenever she had alluded to her absent cousin, and her refusal to relate the particulars of that interview at Lady Carrick's which had resulted in their separation, prevented her from hinting at a renewal of their intimacy. Moreover, she was one of a school, unusual among mothers, who consider that lovers are the best people to manage their own affairs, and that the interference of others only tends to make matters worse.

‘It is a splendid match from every point of view in which the world indulges, and I expect the number of those who will envy you the possession of Lord Ardross is legion. Of course, you would not have accepted him unless you had liked him?’

Such was the slight ‘feeler’ that Lady Allerton put out to try and ascertain the extent to which her daughter's feelings were concerned.

‘I should never commit the unpardonable sin of marrying a man I did not like, mamma,’

she answered, briefly, but very decidedly, and to the day of her marriage her mother knew no more than that. There was very little confidence between Edith and any member of her family, except, perhaps, her younger sister Florence, who perfectly idolised her. The others were proud of her, but, to tell the truth, she was not a lovable girl in the general acceptance of the term. She could love, and love passionately, with an ardour and self-sacrifice that savoured more of the fiery southern than the colder and more regulated northern temperament, but she could not distribute her affections ; her heart could hold but one idol at a time, and it engrossed the whole worship of her nature.

The same night Florence came into her sister's room for the usual little good-night chat that is so great an institution among the fairer portion of humankind. Florence knew more of Edith's real heart than anyone, and she had considerable misgivings in her own mind as to the perfect sincerity of the morning's betrothal.

She was a very beautiful girl, of a softer,

but less brilliant, beauty than Edith, with gentle, pleading blue eyes, which would not take long to win their way to a man’s heart. She stole gently up to her sister, and put her arms caressingly round her neck.

‘Are you quite happy, darling?’ she whispered, as she kissed her.

‘Are not young ladies who are going to be married generally happy, Flory?’ said Edith, with a short, forced laugh.

‘That is not an answer to my question. I want to know if you are happy by “yes” or “no,”’ answered Florence, persistently.

Edith paused a moment and indulged in a little sigh—a rather desponding sign for one who, according to the conventional phrase, should have been the happiest of women.

‘Tolerably so, I think, dear; as happy as I ever shall be in this world, I expect,’ she said, with a suspicion of tears in her voice. She had been receiving congratulations all day, and they are sometimes hard to bear when people do not know on what they are congratulating. She was to marry a man she liked—one whom, perhaps, in time she could

learn to love ; but by that act she was shutting herself out for ever from the man to whom her heart still clung passionately, in spite of her pride and resentment ; and every congratulation reminded her keenly of it.

Florence looked sadly at her sister for a moment ; she knew her moods so well. Then she said, timidly—

‘ You don’t care for Lord Ardross as you did for Fred, I am sure.’

‘ Oh, Florence, dear ! ’ exclaimed Edith, turning towards her with real tears in her eyes this time ; ‘ do not, if you love me, speak that name again. It has been my constant prayer every night since we parted that I may banish it from my thoughts, as I have done from my tongue, and God knows for what reason he will not grant it.’

She bowed her head in her hands in the mute, despairing attitude of grief, and the hot, heavy tears, for the second time that day rolled down her cheeks. She went on speaking sadly and slowly, as if every word cost her a heart-pang :

‘ I loved him with all my soul and strength—

loved him so passionately that I was madly jealous of him, that I spent every moment he was away in wishing eagerly for his return, and reproached him in my own heart for every hour he knowingly passed from my side. I would have followed him to the end of the world—through poverty, and humiliation, and disgrace—if his constant love had been the reward of my sacrifice. I would have sooner renounced for him life, reputation, everything that a woman is taught to reverence, than have been the bride of the noblest emperor in Christendom. Do you think, Florence, that such love as that comes twice in our life? Do you think a woman has room for two such idols in one heart?’

Never had Edith confessed as much as this before. Never had Florence learned for certain the depth of the passion which she had suspected was still cherished for her absent cousin.

‘Oh, Edith, darling!’ she said, ‘if this be true, for heaven’s sake pause while there is yet time. Do not give your hand where you cannot bestow your heart. It is not too late

to retrieve the past and be reconciled to Fred.

‘Hush, Florence,’ answered her sister, sternly. ‘*That* can never be. Even were I to know that he loved me still, I would not renew our acquaintance; for to love him again as I loved him then would be a curse, not a blessing. God grant, child, that your heart may never know such a wild, unholy passion for any man as that which has made a shipwreck of my life.’

‘But what compels you to make a shipwreck of your life?’ exclaimed Florence, pleadingly.

‘Pride,’ interrupted her sister—and, as she uttered the word, at that moment she looked superbly beautiful, for pride spoke not less in her tone than in the dark flash of her eye, the haughty curl of her chiselled lip—‘pride, Florence, which, in me, is even stronger than love.’

The weaker nature of the younger girl was abashed before the intenser one of her sister.

‘You may sacrifice your own happiness to your pride, if you choose,’ she said timidly, ‘but you have no right to break other people’s

hearts with it. If you still love Fred better than any other man, it is cruel in you to marry anybody but him.’

‘He may have forgotten me now,’ answered Edith bitterly. ‘Men have such short memories.’

‘That you cannot tell till you see him,’ said Florence obstinately; ‘and seeing him is easily managed.’

‘No, no, Flory dear—a thousand times no!’ exclaimed Edith, pleadingly, putting her arms round her sister’s neck.

‘You must not, you really must not, speak of him any more. I have been foolish to-night, very foolish. I cannot account for my weakness, except, perhaps, that I am a little excited and disposed to think over the past more than I should at another time. There now, darling, don’t say another word. I tell you I am very fond of Guy, and I shall be most happy as Lady Ardross. Now, there dear, do go to bed—I feel so sleepy—good night!’

And, with these words, Edith pushed her sister out of the room; but through the long

weary night she turned restlessly in fitful slumbers, and every time she woke from her troubled dreaming this was the thought that sprung first from consciousness—‘ I wonder if *he* will be sorry when he hears ! ’





CHAPTER X.

‘BITTER TIDINGS.’

NEARLY nine months had elapsed since Hammersley and Saville had left London. They had proceeded straight to America, Saville long having entertained a desire to visit that land of liberty, and judge for himself of the worth of their institutions. As he recorded his impressions in a book which obtained a great circulation and provoked an immense amount of criticism, both favourable and adverse, it is useless wearying the reader with their recapitulation.

To him the tour afforded unfeigned pleasure, and had he had a more cheerful companion, it would have been a double enjoyment ; but truth compels me to state that his disappointment had rendered Hammersley very gloomy.

At times he would have strange and exaggerated bursts of cheerfulness, and then he would display an almost boyish enthusiasm and exuberance of spirits in and at everything. But these fits were very occasional : his general demeanour was excessively morbid. He seemed better when in society or moving about, for it is solitude and stagnation that are most favourable to melancholy. Saville had not been without hopes that a fresh love affair might wean his thoughts from the past ; but, though he got on most admirably with the American ladies, and confessed that in point of piquancy and fascination they were in no wise inferior to their English sisters, still no particular one was sufficiently charming to renew the emotions of love for a second time, and Saville reluctantly came to the conclusion that time would be the only physician to cure his friend's wound.

They were sitting together one night at their hotel, in New York, about three days before returning to the Continent, when a letter arrived for Hammersley, from Melton. This worthy person was pretty frequent in

his correspondence with his friend, detailing to him all the news and gossip that he imagined would interest an exile from fashionable life. Hammersley read on through a variety of easy chit-chat, till he came to the following portion :

‘I have a piece of news to communicate to you, which, I fear, will not prove very pleasant, but as you are sure to hear of it immediately, I may as well tell you as anyone else. The present topic of the day is the engagement of Edith Stewart to Ardross, the young Croesus, whom all the women have been trying to get for the last two years. He is very hard hit, and, I hear from Lady Allerton, wishes the marriage to take place as soon as possible. I have seen Edith several times since her engagement, but cannot make out her real sentiments on the subject. It is remarked that she has dropped flirtation to a great extent; but whether this is owing to the earl’s influence, or because she considers it time to grow decorous, I don’t know. I hope by this time you have quite recovered

your *penchant* in that quarter. I don't pretend to much philosophy, but this I will say—that no woman in the fashionable world is worth breaking one's heart for.

‘There is always some consolation for those who attach themselves to the worship of beauty. Thank heaven, as soon as one star sinks a fresh constellation is sure to rise. The moment Ardross's attentions to Edith became a matter of certainty, a new *débutante* appeared on the scene in the person of a Miss Maud Hilton, whom her admirers declare to have been the most magnificent thing out, “barring none.” Without joking she is a most superb creature. Her face is simply perfection. She is fair, with glorious golden hair, and deep blue eyes on which a poet would rave. She is also clever—that is to say, she manages to shut up some of the silly gentlemen in a manner that must make them feel wonderfully uncomfortable. I am afraid she is too superior a being for me, or else I might have had a try to take unto myself a wife like my neighbours. Malicious people are heard to say that the real reason of Edith's acceptance of Ardross was

her fear of her new rival. I scarcely think this, however, for Edith is not one to strike her colours while there is a chance of victory left, and I would have backed her still at evens to do as much execution as “the Hilton.” If you would take my advice, you would start at once for London, in order to try conclusions with the new-comer. I am sure she is a romantic girl, and I am also pretty certain she feels very little save contempt for a considerable portion of the men whom the worthy mammas regard as eligible.’

He read on mechanically to the end, but the only portion that presented any interest to him was the paragraph that told of Edith’s betrothal. When he had finished he handed the letter to Saville, pointing with his finger to that part which he especially wished him to read.

His friend read it through very slowly, and then flung it down with a contemptuous gesture.

‘You *must* forget her after this,’ he said.
‘You have proved her unworthiness now.’

Hammersley hid his face in his hands for a moment, before replying, then he said—

‘And this is to be the end of our love! For six months, Saville, I have endured torture—the torture of a broken heart. The one thing that has buoyed me up has been the hope that I might return after awhile and find her still true. I garnered up in my memory every vow she had made me—I treasured the recollection of every little act of love in those old days when my heart and pulse throbbed to the music of her voice, and, I said to myself, I will yet be comforted. No woman who spoke such words—who lavished such caresses—can perjure herself so as to become the bride of another.’

‘Tush!’ said Saville, scornfully. ‘The world laughs at lovers’ perjuries. In an age when the writer recants his opinions, and the statesman betrays his party, for gold, how can you expect a poor, weak, silly girl shall keep herself pure?’

His friend scarcely heeded him, but continued in the same low, deep voice, as though talking to himself:

‘ I thought there must have been some reason, at which neither you nor I guessed, to have accounted for her coldness that night ; and I fancied if I gave her time for her resentment to cool, we might be reconciled yet ; and now to find that I am as indifferent to her as the merest stranger whose hand she touches in a dance ! ’

He spoke with the concentrated passion of a strong man, with the bitterness of a wronged man. It is a hard lesson for love to learn, this disbelief in a woman’s purity.

Saville scarcely knew how to console such a grief, but he did his best.

‘ Come, my dear fellow,’ he said cheerfully, ‘ it is no use making the matter worse than it is. Because Edith marries another man, that is no proof she never loved you—nay, no proof that she may not love you still.’

‘ So much the worse ! ’ exclaimed Hammersley. ‘ If she marries him, still loving me, is she less an adulteress at heart than if her name were the common talk of the town ? The world speaks with loathing and disgust of the wretched women who walk the streets

for their livelihood—women whom, in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, poverty has compelled to infamy. Bah! What is the immense difference between them and the pampered daughters of fashion? How much for the purity of the wife for whom Ardross will pay down his gold and silver? He will purchase the right of looking lovingly into eyes that have gleamed with passion for another—of kissing lips that have been tainted a thousand times with the caresses of his rival. After that, give me the wanton of the *café* and the pavement, who, if she has no virtue, has, at any rate, sufficient sense of decency left not to assume it.'

'My dear fellow,' said Saville, expostulatingly—he began to fear disappointment had turned his friend's brain—'you are surely arguing most illogically. If what you advanced were true, nine-tenths of the women would be adulteresses, simply because they did not marry their first lover.'

'And nine-tenths of them deserve the brand,' answered Hammersley, impetuously. 'Bah! Saville! you are a man of liberal ideas,

but you are sadly cramped and narrowed still in some of your social notions. You hold with the common belief of the world, that, so long as the mere form be pure, there is no sin. The New Testament might have taught you better. What said the Preacher of new ideas and social reforms in His day ? You remember His definition of an adulteress—“She that lusteth after a man in her heart.” The best of you modern radicals are sadly behind the Teacher of Galilee.’

Saville was somewhat confounded at this accusation of tame-spirited radicalism. He had never thought very deeply on the subject of women, and he was, therefore, not so indignant at their heartlessness.

‘I don’t feel equal to discussing the question with you to-night,’ he said, good-humouredly, ‘nor do you seem in a very agreeable frame of mind for argument. You look as if you would have little hesitation in murdering Edith or any other woman who had married anybody but her first lover.’

‘My dear Saville,’ answered Hammersley, rather more cheerfully, ‘forgive me if I tell

you that no one can sympathise with a disappointed man unless he knows what love is. I have your own word for it that you never felt it, and you cannot, therefore, possibly understand what I am suffering. I am perfectly aware of the folly of caring any longer for a woman who has treated me so badly. In time, perhaps, the memory of her faithlessness may prove my best cure. I may be able to look in her face and take her hand without one sigh of regret to the past. At this moment, when I look into my heart, I find nothing there but blank and bitter desolation.'

He faltered at the last words, and those tears which a man weeps so rarely rose for a moment to his eyes, but he conquered the weakness instantly, and got up from his seat.

'It would be useless stopping with you now, Saville,' he said; 'I am no fit company for anyone. To-morrow I shall have learned to bear my disappointment as a man should. It is the suddenness of the blow that stuns. I will say "Good-night" now.'

Saville pressed his hand without saying a word, and, after he had left, sat a long time

musing. He roused himself with a start from his reverie.

‘I hope to heaven,’ he muttered to himself, ‘I shall never know such love as is eating that poor fellow’s heart away.’

As he rose from his chair he caught sight of Melton’s letter, which Hammersley had left on the table. He took it up and read it over again, dwelling with some interest on that portion which related to Miss Hilton.

I wonder whether there was such a thing as fate in his utterance of that wish, and taking up the letter immediately afterwards. Little did he dream, as he read on, of the web of misery and remorse that was soon to begin its weaving, and indissolubly connected with that very man whose grief he had just pitied, never thinking that it was the counterpart of what he should suffer himself.





CHAPTER XI.

‘WHO IS MY NEIGHBOUR?’

THE season had commenced. The world of fashion rode in the Park in the morning, and drove in the afternoon ; dined, danced, or otherwise diverted itself in the evening ; thus making life rather resemble a treadmill in its constant round of the same pleasures. The usual number of young men had been ruined, and compelled to drop out of the society to which they had hitherto proved such ornaments ; the ordinary amount of reputations had been besmirched by proceedings in the Divorce Court ; but such were only the black spots in the sun of existence—the ‘naughty boys’ of grown-up life whose refractory behaviour will always be more or less a scandal to their better-conducted neighbours.

Lady Edith was frequently in the Row, with the Earl of Ardross invariably in attendance. She was fond of anything that had a dash of excitement in it. Had she been left to her own devices, I believe she would have inaugurated a ladies’ ‘four-in-hand club,’ and led the procession from the Magazine to a convivial dinner at Richmond with the greatest *élan*. Fortunately, she was not sufficiently her own mistress to enable her to thus set at defiance the ordinary conventionality of her sex.

It had been observed by many of the lynx eyes which envy had rendered more keen, continually watching Edith, that she had altered very much since her engagement.

In truth, a great change had come over that young lady. In her pre-engaged days she had been noted for a certain kind of well-bred insolence, occasionally indulged in towards the more conceited of her admirers, but especially clearly defined to her own sex, which had made her numerous detractors among the latter, and a few among the opposite gender. This, except for an occasional

flash or two of the 'old Adam,' had entirely disappeared. The most empty-brained young recruit, recently enrolled in the ranks of fashion, might utter his tepid twaddle without much fear of the lightning sarcasm which silliness formerly provoked immediately from the scornful lips of Edith Stewart. Moreover, instead of maintaining a state of solitary grandeur, as it had been her custom hitherto—tolerating none but her own liege subjects, and a few of those servile natures of her own sex which always pay court to a successful beauty, probably in the hope that they may come in for the crumbs which fall from the rich man's table—she now condescended to friendly relations with other potentates. Her enemies pretended this was merely the affectation of humility ; that, in so doing, she was really boasting of her triumph in having carried off the best prize of the season. But I think the scandal-loving cliques were wrong here, and I fancy the real meaning of that marked change in Edith was simply that she was trying to become a better woman.

I once heard a good judge of human nature lay it down as an almost indisputable axiom that a disappointment made a good woman better and a bad one worse. It was not altogether at fault with regard to Edith Stewart. In the depths of her nature she had many good and noble qualities—not of a very wide and comprehensive character, perhaps, for common hands would have been powerless to charm them forth. It wanted the *open sesame* of the magician, Love, to give them to the light in all their rich warmth and colouring. But she was free from that inevitable accompaniment to weak natures, fickleness. Forgetfulness was a word unknown in the vocabulary that expressed her feelings ; and, though they had parted in anger, and absence, with the constant round of fresh faces, fresh scenes, and, one would have imagined, fresh thoughts, had presented every opportunity for oblivion of that youthful dream, that parting had left a void in her heart, which had scarcely ached more bitterly in the first agony of their separation than, as the more that time wore on, the more did it

tell her that no one could supply the lost lover's place.

Ardross had heard such accounts of her flirting, and of her general capriciousness in all the relations of social life, that he had almost felt afraid at first of the responsibility attached to undertaking such a girl for a wife. But this alteration in her whole conduct was so charming that the man was scarcely to be blamed if—taking her beauty and position and everything into consideration—he deliberately arrived at the conclusion that he had won a paragon. Besides, the infatuation common to lovers made him attribute all this wonderful change to his own powers of fascination.

Edith, certainly, was sweetness itself to her lover, for I think she liked him as well as she could be expected to like anyone after that first most passionate love. There was a manliness and a heartiness about him which made him shine in very favourable contrast to the *blasé* and emotionless beings who form the ordinary cream of society, and it was, therefore, no wonder that a girl of her

thoroughly Bohemian temperament should be attracted by such a nature, especially when coupled with such devoted love to herself.

Mr. Rochester took the matter of the engagement very coolly, as his acquaintances, who suspected his *penchant* for Edith, unanimously concluded, being wrong in this particular, as most acquaintances are in every opinion they form of a man’s private feelings and emotions. Rochester had been brought up in the fashionable world, and he had learned its one useful accomplishment—the faculty of making one’s countenance an inscrutable mask. But underneath that veneer of refinement and polish there lurked a nature almost savage in its intensity—a nature deep, powerful, passionate, at strange variance with the exquisitely-chiselled, calm features of the noblest type of God’s most noble physical gift, beauty.

The etiquette of ordinary acquaintance demanded that he should congratulate Ardross. He did so with apparent frankness and heartiness, although, if a wish could kill, he would have slain where he stood the man who

was about to enjoy that which he would have perilled life and soul to win for himself. To Edith he simply expressed a hope that she would never repent her choice—a dubious congratulation at the best—and asked if her engagement had rendered it necessary that they must discontinue their friendship.

To this Edith had unhesitatingly answered in the negative. Although she shuddered at the thought of Rochester for a husband, she liked him well enough as a friend ; and friendship is always particularly dear to a woman who has outlived love through age or disappointment. After ratifying their innocent compact anew, he went on talking on indifferent subjects in such a calm manner that Edith herself was almost perplexed to make out whether her engagement concerned him as little as his manner would lead her to assume.

It is a peculiar feature in women, that they never like to let an old admirer go. I do not say this in any reproach to Edith for the awful catastrophe which followed ; for no woman is bound to sacrifice herself for a man she does not like, however passionate may be

the love he bears to her. But this I will assert, in spite of the objurgations that are sure to be showered on me from every quarter, male and female alike—flirting is a most reprehensible amusement. It looks very pretty and interesting on a croquet lawn or in a ballroom, this harmless little pastime—these soft whispers, these coquettish glances, these accidental pressures of the hand; and in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred they lead to no bad result—a quiet broken heart or two the only untoward incident. But there are a few paragraphs we light on in our newspapers, a few awe-stricken words we hear whispered in our drawing-rooms, that give the dark side of the picture, that epitomise the history of an awful despair—of one human life sacrificed to the folly or vanity of another.

It was a short time before the day when the marriage was fixed to take place that Rochester one night at Lady Carrick’s alluded to the subject again. These two, when he congratulated her being the first, were the only occasions on which he ever spoke concerning it.

They were sitting near each other in the drawing-room, on the occasion of a small family dinner, to which he and Melton had been the only strangers invited. Ardross was to return to town that evening and come on to Lady Carrick's ; but it wanted a good half-hour to the time when he was expected to arrive, and Rochester consequently enjoyed the luxury of monopolising her till the lawful claimant should take possession.

She had been singing, and he had dutifully turned over the pages for her. When she had finished, he took a chair near the music stool and leaned slightly on the ledge of the piano, from whence he could enjoy an undisturbed view of the beauty which had affected him so fearfully.

How well she could recall afterwards every detail of that interview : the others talking in low tones at the far end of the great drawing-room ; the handsome, calm-looking face so close to her own ; she carelessly trifling with some pieces of music as he spoke.

These were the first words with which he commenced the conversation :

‘The time draws near to renounce the pomps and vanities of the world ; in other words, to become Lady Ardross.’

Edith laughed slightly : even her laugh was a trifle sadder than it used to be.

‘One would think I was about to enter a nunnery, instead of the holy, and, I hope, cheerful, state of matrimony, by the lugubrious manner in which you advert to it.’

‘I suppose even *you* do not look upon it as an every-day occurrence, too common to provoke the slightest reflection ; or do you fancy that it is a thing to be contracted lightly, to be drawn upon your life as easily as you would pull a glove on your hand ?’

The beautiful deep blue eyes were looking into her’s mournfully and half angrily, as if he thought her unconcerned tone were an insult to his great love.

She shifted her eyes uneasily from his steady gaze. ‘You are becoming very severe all of a sudden,’ she said, petulantly. ‘The other night I heard you delivering a long tirade to the effect that a woman ought to search her heart diligently when she married.

How long is it, pray, since you have grown so proper? Did you always search your heart before you tried to steal other people's?

‘I have grown “proper,” as you call it, through bitter experience,’ he answered, with a deep complaining anger in his tones. ‘I know too well the curse of blighted hopes. God be my witness—I would not trifle with another’s happiness now.’

‘Now, this is too bad,’ she said, gently, for a vast pity had come into her heart for the deep, misguided love. ‘You *will* pain me and yourself too by dwelling on the past. Why will you oblige me to repeat what I have said so often before, that I like you as a friend—no one better, nay, so well—but I cannot marry you, nor ever could? I know all your kindness and goodness; but, even if I myself could commit the sin of giving you my hand without my heart, would you be contented with a loveless wife, who shrunk from your love, who fled at your presence?’

Hard, plain truths to be spoken these, but he had grown used to them now, and loved

her none the less because her determination was as firm as ever.

‘No,’ he answered. ‘Unhappy as I am without you, I would be ten times more miserable if you came to me without love. I would wait for you patiently till you were wrinkled, and old, and grey, for your beauty could never fade in my eyes. There is no human peril I would not brave, no human obstacle I would not surmount, if I could hope thereby to win you ; but it must be your heart, not your hand, that I had won.’

She was silent at this. Her words could only inflame, not soothe, his grief, and she remained with her eyes fixed upon a piece of music, but sorely troubled at heart. She was casting in her mind as to whether she had not to bear some blame in this mad infatuation—if chance words or looks of apparent encouragement might not have drawn him on deeper than had they never been uttered. I think in that hour Edith’s conscience was not free from some guilty pangs.

Well has beauty been termed a fatal gift. When the devil planned the guilt of our first

parents, it was through the lips of a lovely woman that he whispered the words of temptation ; and from the day when the flaming swords of the cherubim barred the gates of Eden to their race, glowing eyes and sweet lips have lured men to madness, to dishonour, and to death.

Rochester spoke again presently, rousing himself from a rather long musing.

‘ Regrets are useless,’ he said. ‘ The wisest of men cannot recall the past—they can only forget it. Every man has not the strength to do that. Your fate is sealed, and,’ he added in a lower tone, as if muttering to himself, ‘ mine soon will be.’

At that moment she thought he only alluded to her marriage. Later on she comprehended the awful significance of those last words.

‘ Regrets, as you say, are useless,’ she said cheerfully. ‘ In a few days I shall be Lady Ardross. I intend then to settle down into a model of decorum, and renounce flirtation and all other kindred abominations for ever ;

but you and I can always continue good friends, can we not, Edward?’

It was the first time she had ever called him by his Christian name, and, self-possessed man of the world as he was, that word, spoken by her lips, sent a red flush to his cheek. At that moment he was as little master of himself as the veriest schoolboy.

‘We will be friends,’ he said, quietly, ‘and, if I can possibly be good Christian enough, I will not hate your husband.’

‘Love your neighbour as yourself,’ laughed Edith.

‘And who is my neighbour?’ asked Rochester, sarcastically. ‘Uriah, the Hittite, and King David lived in very close proximity, but I don’t expect he had much love for the man who robbed him of his one ewe lamb.’

At that moment Lady Carrick advanced to interrupt their confidential *tête-à-tête*.

‘I forgot one thing I had to tell you,’ he said, hurriedly. ‘I intend to send you my wedding present *after* your marriage, instead

of before. It is a mere whim of mine. It makes no difference to you, I suppose?'

Before she could reply her sister-in-law came up. She knew afterwards how well he kept his word.





CHAPTER XII.

‘DESTROYING THE PAST.’

A MARRIAGE is a pleasant affair to look upon. The gay dresses, the happy faces of bride and bridegroom (for, I think, on such occasions the principal actors in the performance try to *look beaming*, whatever may be their private sentiments on the subject), the convivial breakfast, and perhaps the encouragement it gives to go and do likewise, are an attraction in themselves, even if one is a most ordinary acquaintance. There certainly seems an undefinable charm in a wedding to the outside public, for the sight of the white favours is always sufficient to draw together a crowd, whose thorough sympathy with the proceedings is quite refreshing. Even the rapid

butcher boy—not a being whom one at first sight would credit with an overpowering amount of sentiment—arrests his progress for the nonce, and becomes totally oblivious of the requirements of his master's customers ; and the milliner's or dressmaker's assistant is far too much of a woman to think of stirring from the spot till she has obtained a satisfactory view of the bride and her dress.

Two such comets in the sphere of fashion as Edith and Lord Ardross were bound to have a grand wedding. St. George's was, of course, the church chosen, and all the cream of London notables were bidden, Royalty itself being represented among the guests.

Were I to give my own opinion on the subject of marriages, I should say they can never be conducted too quietly. Where there is real love on both sides it is naturally a matter of rejoicing ; but the joy that two young people feel in undertaking such a solemn compact, in entering on a new life together till death do them part, is too sacred for others to mingle or pretend to mingle in.

Such, I am aware, are not the sentiments

entertained by the majority of fashionable people. With them every opportunity of display lost seems a sin.

I believe in her heart Edith disliked all this pomp and pageantry that surrounds marriage, but in her position she could scarcely insist upon being united to her lover quietly, so she prepared herself to become for a few hours the one object of curiosity and observation to the one thousand and one people bidden to the wedding.

She was alone in her room the night before her marriage. She had dismissed her maid, and in the grate a low fire was burning, which she had ordered to be lighted for a purpose. I think the reflections of any girl must have a slight tinge of solemnity when the time draws near for her entering on what is practically a new existence. Edith, in spite of her apparent gaiety, was really more of a melancholy than a cheerful temperament, and to-night her thoughts, as she sat musing before the fire, must have been rather sad, for every now and then a tear would steal slowly from the bright eyes that looked ashamed of

themselves the moment it was shed. Even in the privacy of her own chamber pride was still the dominant characteristic.

She rose presently and took from her desk two large packets of letters in the same handwriting. They were each tied up with a piece of blue ribbon, and she began to untie them slowly. She could not destroy them at once—scarcely any woman could have done so under the circumstances—but, drawing her chair closer to the fire to which they were soon to be consigned, began glancing through them one after another.

There were first the boyish letters, written when he first went to Harrow, telling her again and again how he missed her, and found by absence how dearly he loved her; waxing manlier in tone as he advanced in age. Then there came the letters from Oxford—some before their betrothal, but the greater number after. What passionate, loving letters they were! And then, presently, she came to the last one he had written from there. It was perhaps the shortest of the whole collection—for it had been written two days before his

return—and, after telling her to expect him by the mid-day train, it went on—

‘Sometimes do you know, Edith, I almost think my happiness must be a dream. I have lived all my life, from the childish days when I first loved you, on the hope that you might some day be my wife ; but now that I have your word for it, I almost feel doubtful. I feel, like a miser with his treasure, that I must continually have you in sight, lest some evil fate should steal you from me. Oh, Edith darling, I pray night and day that you will be true, for, were you to prove false now, it would break my heart.’

That was the paragraph which she read over twice. She had other letters, more passionate in tone, more flattering to her vanity perhaps, but there was a ring of deep love in that which was worth them all. ‘For, were you to prove false now, it would break my heart.’ Never had that sentence come home to her as it did on that night. She *had* proved false to him, her conscience told her,

oh, how bitterly! She had rejected the overtures he made for reconciliation when he had sent Saville as his intercessor, and to-morrow she was about to afford him the crowning proof of her faithlessness by wedding another. Her thoughts wandered to where he might be now—in some foreign land most likely, breaking his heart at her treachery.

I believe had Florence come in at that moment and offered to bring Hammersley back to her feet, she would have gone away with him, to the utter oblivion of the earl and everything connected with the marriage so near. But as she sat there, her conscience and her love pricking her so sorely, she knew that it was too late to repair the error of her life now. When the tempting fruit was within her reach she would not stretch her hand to gather it; now that she hungered and thirsted for it, it was far, far beyond her grasp.

She dropped the letters in the fire one by one, watching them burn till the heedless

flame destroyed their secrets, until she came to that last one.

‘I may keep this one, I think,’ she murmured to herself. ‘It will be the only letter I shall have from him for a memory. If Guy discovered it he could not mind very much. We are dead to each other now, and, were we to meet, my marriage will dig a gulf between us that neither can ever cross. I think I may rescue this from the flames.’

The wish to do it was strong, but the thought of the loyalty she owed to the man whom to-morrow she was to call husband finally conquered. She dropt it into the steady flame.

She watched it consume, and then suddenly buried her face in her hands with a great cry.

‘Oh, my own darling !’ she moaned, scarcely recognising the uselessness of the wish in her agony, ‘come back to me, for my heart is breaking without you !’

I think few girls whom the morrow was to make brides had a more miserable vigil than Edith Stewart on the night before she became Lady Ardross.

But the next morning found her beautiful and self-possessed as ever. If her heart was broken, no one but herself should know it. They tricked her out in her finery ; and, certainly, when the admiring eyes of her friends rested upon her, they were fain to confess that the earl would have to seek far for a lovelier or a more fascinating bride.

His lordship had also got himself up with scrupulous care. Unfortunately, public opinion has reduced men to a sober attire very different from that of the days when the luckless Sir Peter Teazle discovered his wife in the house of the immaculate Joseph. The picturesque-ness of coloured coats, embroidered linen, knee breeches, and buckles has disappeared, I fear never to return ; but the clothes the earl wore came from Poole's, and were turned out with all the finish and elegance of that celebrated artist.

Neither of the performers betrayed any nervousness. Edith's responses were uttered in a rather low but firm tone, and the earl pronounced his 'I will' with an energy and

heartiness that inferred he had nothing to be ashamed of in the transaction.

After the ceremony the guests returned to Lord Allerton's, where, in the language of newspapers, they sat down to a splendid *dejeuner*. Mr. Rochester was there, handsome and calm-looking as ever, and to him it fell to propose the bridesmaids, a task of which he acquitted himself gracefully, and with a tolerable amount of the wellbred facetiousness which is considered correct on such occasions.

In the due course of time the ‘happy pair’ left for Luton Castle, where they were to spend their honeymoon, and then the guests rapidly dispersed. In shaking hands with the bride, Rochester had found time to whisper—

‘You shall be sure to have your present.’

There was a peculiar look on his face as he said that, which she could not help remarking; but so many were around her bidding her adieu that she could not reply.

Rochester's first proceeding on leaving Lord Allerton's was to hail a hansom and drive to the Euston Station, in order to catch the next train for Harrow. What he did there I must leave for another chapter.



CHAPTER XIII.

‘A REMEDY IN DEATH.’

GRENVIL ROCHESTER was extremely like his brother, only he was not so handsome, and, although only seventeen, the taller of the two. He had been sent to Harrow before he was fifteen, and his mother, his only surviving parent, was not without hopes that he would take a high position in the school. Abilities he undoubtedly had. When he thoroughly set to work to learn anything he could do it quicker than most boys of his age; but, unfortunately, his energy was not in proportion, and he was not long at Harrow before he allowed the seductions of cricket, racquets, and football, in all of which he was an adept, to interfere materially with those good resolu-

tions with which he had quitted the maternal wing. But, still, if his progress was not so brilliant as had been anticipated, it was eminently respectable. He managed to work up at the rate of a form a quarter, and was now, after two years sojourn, landed in the ‘upper fifth’—one remove below that exalted body of beings, the ‘sixth.’

Mr. Rochester, junior, was in a particularly good temper on this particular Thursday. His amiability was to be ascribed to two very good reasons. The first was that two days ago he had been put in the school ‘eleven’ as first choice; and the first choice in the Harrow ‘eleven’ is regarded with as much awe and reverence by the school generally as that which, in grown-up society, a member of the blood royal would meet with at the hands of the ‘genteel’ population of Hackney or Dalston. In the second place, his brother had written to say he would be down that afternoon, and such an advent meant a good dinner at the King’s Head, with as much champagne and other wines as was consistent with discretion. On the receipt of his

brother's epistle, he had immediately repaired to the King's Head, and consulted his own judgment in the choice of the viands. This being off his mind, he waited with great complacency at the door of the inn for signs of his visitor.

He was not long in appearing. A fly came rattling along the narrow High-street, passing crowds of afternoon loungers giving a stimulus to their appetites in the shape of ices, tarts, and other schoolboy and not very wholesome delicacies, at the various confectioners' which abound so liberally, and deposited Rochester in front of his brother.

They shook hands in the quiet, undemonstrative manner in which Englishmen usually greet their dearest friends, and then sauntered into the garden behind the inn, and deposited themselves in one of the little alcoves which the proprietors of the King's Head provide so liberally for their guests.

Grenvil was bursting to tell his news.

'I have been put into the "eleven,"' he said, looking with calm pride at his brother, yet not without an inward conviction that he

would betray great emotion at the announcement.

In this, however, he was mistaken. At that moment a much more startling occurrence than this would not have interested him. He turned round, however, with a faint show of interest.

‘I am very glad to hear it, and congratulate you most heartily,’ he said ; and after he had uttered it he remembered the pride with which he had communicated to his admiring friends, a few years ago, the same distinction conferred on himself. These little vanities all seemed so worthless now.

‘What choice were you?’ he asked, presently.

‘First,’ answered Grenvil, slowly and solemnly.

‘Then you are more a hero than ever,’ exclaimed his brother, cheerfully. ‘You must be quite a shining light here.’

Grenvil’s modesty did not permit him to make answer to this. In his own private mind he considered himself a *very* shining illumination, but he had the grace to keep it to himself.

The cricket subject was exhausted. Rochester was evidently too busy with other thoughts to feign an interest in it, and they sat silent for a little while, till Grenvil adverted to the topic that was all-absorbing to his brother.

‘How did you enjoy the wedding this morning?’ he asked.

It was the thought of that which had been haunting him all the day, sitting by his side at the marriage feast, clinging to him as he rode down on the train, the mad rush of which through the air was not so swift as the rapid sense of his own agony coursing like serpent stings through his brain.

Assuredly it must have been madness—madness of the most subtle kind—as he sat there facing his young brother, with that deadly purpose in his heart, yet with such calmness in his eye and on his tongue; not a frenzy that required padded walls and fetters to restrain its paroxysms, but the madness of a deep and almost savage nature, in which one bitter disappointment, brooded over night and day, had ousted reason from its throne.

Have we not read of good and saintly men—

men whose lives from their cradle have been one white page of purity and peace—thus suddenly transformed into the very opposite by some word or act of another that has found out the weak spot in their saintly armour—the one open sore where the drop of poison can be instilled that turns their whole nature into gall, and makes of them criminals or madmen?

Was it then such a marvel that Rochester—a man whose aimless, purposeless life had been purified by no early trial or suffering; to whom religion and belief were but a name, or at best words the deep, grand significance of which he never cared to understand—was it, I say, such a marvel that his weak nature shrank from dragging on a life of blighted hopes and broken heart, which so many holier and stronger men have found insupportable?

His brother's question struck upon his thoughts, as the knife of a surgeon probing a wound, but he answered calmly: 'The ceremony went off with great *éclat*. The bride looked lovely—the bridegroom handsome—the dresses were magnificent—

and, in brief, everybody behaved beautifully.' He laughed as he said this; but his brother, dreaming of bats and balls, or of something equally worthless, did not notice the bitterness in that laugh.

'It must have been very jolly,' he said, in a sort of grumbling voice. 'How I should have liked to have been there. What a change life must be, after poking down in this musty old hole of a school. Didn't you find it so when you left?'

'I did find a great difference, as you say,' answered his brother, with a quiet significance that the other did not then comprehend; 'but I doubt if I was really better off. I was very happy here: my wants were easily satisfied, and my little vanities, such as they were, soon gratified.'

Grenvil could not understand his brother's depreciation of the delights obtainable in 'life,' as he termed it.

'I suppose you have got tired, because you have had so much of it?' he answered. 'You have gone the whole pace, as they say; but I should find it awfully jolly to be continually

in a round of gaiety and pleasure, and flirting with a lot of pretty girls.'

'You might fall in love with one of the pretty girls,' said Rochester, with a peculiar smile.

'All the better,' answered Grenvil, cheerfully. 'I should think nothing could be jollier than to fall in love with a girl who liked me.'

'And suppose the young lady had the bad taste not to like you : what then ?'

'In that case,' returned Grenvil, with the easy philosophy of inexperienced youth, 'I should transfer my affections to someone who could. There's a Jack for every Jill, and *vice-versa*, I suppose ; isn't there ?'

'Affections are not transferred so easily as you imagine, my dear boy,' said his brother, 'as you will learn perhaps some day. You have evidently got to buy your experience.'

Mr. Grenvil did not reply to this, but he was nevertheless not convinced, although reduced to silence. Like the country mouse who wanted to be fashionable, he could not understand that a quiet life, with no dangers

or emotions to threaten or harass, is preferable to a more turbulent existence where pleasure and pain are too inextricably mingled for anything like comfort.

Presently they sauntered down to the cricket-field for want of something better to do. There was the usual ‘sixth-form game’ going on, from his participation in which Grenvil had excused himself on account of his brother’s visit. All that was happening seemed like a dream to Rochester: those eager, running figures—those sounding strokes of the bat—the flying away of the ball—the concourse of youthful faces in the field and by the pavilion—the buzz of talk and laughter continually borne upon his ears. It seemed strange to him, so utterly changed from what he was, that the world, the happy, cheerful world, could go on the same now that Edith Stewart was lost to him for ever.

There he sat on the steps of the pavilion with his brother, his handsome face and figure attracting the glance of many of the boys, who took in admiringly the perfection of his dress, and everything which denoted

him, in their language, a ‘swell;’ and, all the while, they were gazing on a most miserable man—a man who, at that moment, was taking almost his last look at ‘sun, and earth, and sky’—at God’s and Nature’s splendour—who, in a few hours, would face his Maker, with an awful sin upon his soul—the sin of taking away the life which belongs to Him who gave it.

The bell rang for six o’clock ‘bill,’ as the calling over was termed, and Grenvil, who had leave of absence, walked back with his brother to the King’s Head to dinner.

It was a very silent meal, but the absence of conversation did not distress Grenvil very much. The viands were ample and various, and he had, therefore, more leisure in which to do them justice. A good dinner was not a luxury he enjoyed every day, for Harrow masters are not proverbial for pampering the appetites of those committed to their charge. There is a Spartan-like simplicity in their commissariat that often requires a large amount of the Spartan sauce, hunger, to render it palatable.

After dinner, which took some time in discussing—not that Rochester protracted the banquet on his own account, he only dallied with the dishes that afforded such unfeigned gratification to his brother, who was far too busy to notice the other's want of appetite—they smoked. Smoking was strictly against the rules, and any gentleman detected in the abominable act was liable to be 'interviewed' by the head master; and in some cases—where his position in the school was not sufficiently high to protect his person from sacrilege—to be summarily birched, or, as the Harrow vernacular hath it, 'swiped.' Grenvil, however, being of an audacious nature—with scant respect in his composition for the powers that be—indulged in the forbidden fruit, and trusted to chance to escape detection by the olfactory nerves of such men in authority as he might happen to meet.

It was early in the summer, and 'locking-up' was at eight. At ten minutes to, just as the summoning bell began to ring, Rochester rose to go. His brother accompanied him as

far as the chapel, and there bade him ‘good-bye.’

He walked rather slowly towards the station after his brother had left him, till, in a few seconds, he came to a turning facing fields. He entered these by a gate placed at the head of a footpath, and then rapidly quickened his pace.

He had known that walk well in his Harrow schooldays. It led straight on to a little wooden railway bridge, on the sides of which boys, with that mania for operating with a penknife which seems inherent in Englishmen, were fond, and are so still, I dare say, of carving their names. As he neared the bridge he turned off in the direction of the left, and at last reached an embankment from which there was an easy descent to the rails below.

It was growing very dusk, but he looked cautiously about to see if there was anyone near watching him. Then, apparently satisfied, he crept gently down the smooth slope, and stood upon the ‘down’ line. When he had done this he pulled out his watch ; the dusk

had come on so rapidly that he was obliged to peer closely into it.

‘About ten minutes more,’ he muttered to himself, ‘and it will be here.’

He flung away the cane he had carried with him, and sat on the slope with folded arms, waiting for Death.

And it had come to this! This spoiled darling of society, whom women had petted for his beauty, whom men had envied for his success, had come here to die by himself, with not a human hand near to save or succour him—to die lone and friendless as the veriest vagrant that perished by the roadside! And he had calmly elected to die thus from the moment when he had known Edith Stewart was lost to him. He had hoped against hope to win her, and, when hope was snatched from him, he had deliberately chosen between death and the blankness of life without her. He had chosen this terrible death because he thought it would be the most certain and instantaneous, and perhaps because he thought such a ghastly end would strike some remorse

and pity at last into the heart of the woman he had loved in vain.

The minutes seemed to drag into hours as he sat there waiting in that horrible suspense. Suddenly he fancied he heard a sound. He stooped and placed his ear to the rails. Yes, sure enough, there it was—the noise growing nearer and distincter every second. He drew himself up again, and looked in the dusk towards London. Yes, there it was ahead—the mighty engine, with its lamps shining like balls of fire in the dusk stillness of the night. There it was, racing along at awful speed, fearful in its great, resistless strength, ready to crush the life out of any obstacle in its rushing path.

Who shall say if in that moment, when he stood face to face with the ghastly presence of Death, some natural weakness did not rise within him, prompting him to flee from the grim embrace so ready to clutch him, counselling him that in life itself there might yet be oblivion for shattered hopes, and fond dreams so falsely realised? If such there was, he conquered it.

It was close on him, the wheels grinding along with a terrible grating noise, the huge engine sending forth clouds of black smoke. He bent down quickly and placed his head over the rails, leaving the neck free to be crushed. He had scarcely done so when it was upon him, its fiery breath playing over him, the awful grinding noise close to his ears. Another instant—almost a lifetime to the prostrate figure stretched there—and the unconscious monster sped on its way, crushing in its passage, the life out of one of the fairest of God's creatures.

* * * * * * * *

The day after the wedding there came to Luton Castle a small box for Lady Ardross. Inside it was a gold locket with the monogram E. R. set in diamonds, and a paper attached to it in Rochester's handwriting: 'The wedding present promised by me.' At the bottom of the box was a letter, which Edith opened with a strange presentiment of dread. It was as follows:—

‘ My darling Edith,—

‘ You *are* my darling still. I may call you so now, for I shall not offend in word or deed again ; and even in the last moments of the death which I deliberately seek you will be my only thought. God grant that, in the world to which I am going, there will be forgetfulness for such a mad love as was never before felt by mortal man. I do not write this to reproach you. Mine was the folly, and mine will be the penalty. All I ask of you, Edith—my dying request it is I make—keep this locket I send you in memory of me, and, if you can, preserve some little pity in your heart for the fate of the man whose misery it has been that he loved you “not wisely, but too well.” ’

There was no signature at the bottom, but she knew the handwriting, and the evening’s telegrams confirmed the truth of what he had threatened.

There were sore hearts and weeping eyes enough for Edward Rochester, for his beauty had made him well-beloved of many women ;

but I doubt if any shed more bitter, and none such remorseful, tears, as the woman whose fatal charms had lured him to his own undoing.





CHAPTER XIV.

‘TEMPTATION.’

‘IF one wants to get rid of blue devils, by all means come to Paris. There is a gaiety pervading the people, the streets, everything, in fact, that is positively infectious. If a man feels melancholy in London, there is everything ready to induce him to cut his throat ; but here one feels as if life could be made pleasant for ever.’

So spoke Hammersley to Saville, a week after their arrival in the ‘capital of nations ;’ and his friend cordially echoed the sentiment.

A few days after Melton had communicated to him the news of Edith’s engagement Hammersley’s malady had decidedly taken a favourable turn. He seemed to think it was of no use sighing over the inevitable. His

spirits flowed, if not with their former buoyancy, at least much more cheerfully and uniformly than at any period since he had left England. How far this change was real, or but another symptom of the danger and insidiousness of his disease, the sequel will show.

At any rate, he began to fancy himself that he was recovering from the memory of his old love. He watched himself narrowly, scrutinising carefully every thought and feeling, to discover if they were less engrossed and sensitive on the one subject, in much the same manner as the consumptive patient will note the slightest diminution of his cough, the faintest degree of extra strength, and deduce from such favourable symptoms some hope that he may yet cheat the grave.

There was a good sprinkling of English society in Paris at the time they arrived, and as neither Hammersley nor Saville were particularly addicted to loneliness, they readily participated in such gaiety as their own countrymen and their French acquaintance afforded them.

‘ Amongst other English visitors was the Countess of Glengariff with her son, the earl, and her two daughters, the Ladies Florence and Mary Arden. The countess was aunt to Rochester, on his mother’s side, and from her Hammersley heard a fuller account of his unhappy death.

It had been hushed up as much as possible, and the inquest had resulted in the usual verdict of temporary insanity. To the outside public a suicide more or less was of little consequence ; but in his own circle there were a good many who had guessed pretty shrewdly at the reason of his ghastly ending. His attentions to Edith had been observed by nearly every one. These would not, perhaps, have been so much an evidence themselves, only there were some other facts to support them. In his confidential moods Rochester had confided to his mother and to three or four of his most intimate friends, the intensity of his passion for Edith ; and when the news of his suicide, on the very evening of the wedding, was circulated round, these latter readily came forward to solve the mystery in

the satisfactory manner in which most people deal with their dead friends' memory, *i.e.*, commiserating them with a pronounced pity, that is in itself a suggestion of what fools they made of themselves.

Whether true or not, ordinary people had no means of judging. Rochester had never hinted even the possible contemplation of such an end ; but, taking all the circumstances into consideration, it *looked* true, and this was quite enough for that rather large circle of busybodies who were only too glad to get hold of a nice tangible scandal about Edith. More than one old dowager and spiteful maiden pursed up their envious lips with inward satisfaction at the pleasant prospect they derived from the first tale of misery with which her name was connected ; and old Lady Kintosh, whose daughter, the Honourable Flora McTavish, had been especially pertinacious in her pursuit of the Earl of Ardross, insinuated without scruple to her intimates, that 'that girl would set the world talking a great deal more yet.'

Malicious old dowager ! How prophetic

she was in her spite. Poor Edith ! she was not at all popular with her own sex. I think a good many of them would have liked to ostracise her altogether ; but she was too powerful for that ; her connections had too firm a foothold in the world of fashion. The Marchioness of Allerton and her daughter-in-law, the Countess of Carrick, were acknowledged leaders of *ton*. No aspirant for fashion was duly qualified till he had received his diploma from their houses ; so that those lesser luminaries who revolved around the great planets could not dare to openly disdain one so nearly allied to them. Moreover, Edith had a very staunch band of supporters in the men, and, however much people might have deemed it safe to show coldness to her as Edith Stewart, her position as the wife of Lord Ardross placed her far above their like or dislike.

And she had determined to take up her position right royally. She had married him, and she would derive all the benefits she could from her husband's wealth and status. As Lady Ardross she could aspire to lead, to

be, not to follow, the fashion; and the privileges of her position she was resolved to exercise to the utmost. Next season should witness the assumption of her new dignity.

The death of Rochester had at first been a violent shock to her, the more especially so because she could not altogether divest herself of a certain amount of remorse in the transaction. She had denied his suit the moment he had pressed it; but had she not given him a tacit encouragement at first, which, although regarded by her as a mere necessity of flirtation, might have led many a wiser man into the belief that she cared for him? It was a keen blow when it came first upon her, but it had worn off. Pity she had plenty for the dead man lying in that early grave, but love she had never had; and the most sympathetic of us soon recover a grief in which the heart—the only thing that can keep it alive—has no share.

It is a bitter truth, this cold indifference of the world to all but its own immediate interests, but one which experience very soon teaches us. Rochester had given his life for

the love he bore her, yet, in a few years, almost his memory would pass away from the woman he had worshipped so madly.

To Hammersley the whole affair, when the news reached him, first through the newspapers, and then more fully through the letters of his friends, was almost inexplicable, or, if to be explained at all, explained in a manner that left him more than ever in the dark as to Edith's real nature. He had never been without suspicion that the handsome face and person of Rochester had made more impression on her than she would have cared to avow. This suspicion was especially confirmed on the night when they parted, when she gave to Rochester those two dances which were on his part the *teterrima causa belli*; but then, again, read by the light of recent events, this could scarcely be correct. There was little doubt that he loved her, and he was the last man to refrain from asking for what he sought. If she had returned his affection, as Hammersley had hitherto believed, surely she would have married him. As it was, she had wedded another man; and hence arose the

question which, steeled as he thought himself now, would shoot a jealous pang through his heart every time he asked it—‘If she refused the man I thought she loved, how dearly must she love the man she calls her husband now?’

Yet, he fancied himself cured now—poor deluded mortal! He fancied he could take Edith Stewart’s hand, and look in Edith Stewart’s eyes, without one regretful memory to the past. But when he asked himself that little catechism, he began to feel fearful that the old demon of love was lying, not crushed and powerless, but only slumbering and couchant for a fresh spring.

He was soon to have an opportunity of testing his strength or weakness. Lord and Lady Ardross were to arrive in Paris in a few days, and take up their quarters at the Hotel de Morny for a week, or a fortnight, or a month—as long in fact as it suited their humour, or rather her’s, for Ardross gave way to her in everything.

In fact, he felt himself the happiest of men. He had a beautiful wife, and he believed she

loved him. Nor was he much to blame in this supposition, since everything that had happened had tended to confirm it. She had shown him Rochester's letter, and had expressed, with many tears, her remorse at ever having given him any encouragement that could have excited the slightest hopes. What was the earl to conclude from this save one thing, that evidently she would not marry a man she did not love? She had married him; therefore she loved him. What more satisfactory conclusion could he arrive at? In fact, I am not sure whether in his heart of hearts he was not rather proud to think he had a wife whose fascinations could prove so fatal to other men.

And Edith liked her husband, for he was good, and gentle, and kind; and, as I have said, a great change had come over her. She had learned to appreciate love and kindness better than was her wont in the old days, and the most envious who saw them a few months after their marriage were fain to confess that they must wait a little for the scandal that was to set the spiteful tongues

of the world discussing her name and fame once more.

They were coming to Paris; and that information was more interesting to Hammersley than he would have cared to acknowledge to any one except that best of *confidantes*—self. If he was strong, as he imagined, should he leave or stay? If he left, of course the thought of her could not possibly haunt him; but if, on the other hand, he stayed, should he not show her better by that act his utter indifference? He felt sure he could leave; oh, yes, quite sure. But, still, it would be a great triumph to let her see for herself that the heart she had trampled on was not broken; for her to meet him continually in society, exchange common-place remarks with him, and tell, by his hopeless friendliness, that the past was so forgotten that he did not care enough even to resent it.

So he reasoned to himself, and so have reasoned many more men similarly situated. They do not know that a woman's power over a man who loves her is limitless. The rhetoric of bright eyes and soft lips has more

influence than the eloquence of the wisest, ‘charm they never so wisely.’

Hammersley and Saville were sitting at their hotel after breakfast on the morning after the Earl of Ardross and his wife had arrived. Saville was busily engaged writing a most important chapter in his forthcoming political work ; his friend was smoking. Presently, seemingly weary of the enforced stillness, he took his cigar from his mouth and spoke.

‘I tell you what, Saville, it is a crying shame to waste a beautiful morning like this indoors. Leave those musty old facts, and let us make an excursion to St. Cloud.’

Saville looked up with refusal plainly written on his countenance.

‘My dear fellow,’ he answered, ‘I can’t help the weather. My genius won’t keep till wet mornings. At the present moment my brain is bursting with mighty thoughts, and I must commit them to paper as soon as I can. If I were to keep them till to-morrow, I should find they were evaporated.’ And, so saying, he bent down resolutely to his desk.

‘Very well, then,’ answered Hammersley, ‘I am not going to make a martyr of myself on the altar of friendship. I shall go alone; so take care of yourself in my absence.’ And therewith he went up to his room to prepare himself for a drive to St. Cloud, leaving his friend hard at work cracking his political nuts.





CHAPTER XV.

‘ONCE AGAIN.’

IN about half-an-hour Mr. Hammersley descended to the hotel-door, and found his mail-phaeton waiting for him. He was a first-rate judge of horseflesh, and the two magnificent chesnuts that he usually drove in it had cost their owner no insignificant sum. Even Sir Talbot Mostyn—that great authority in equine matters, whose drag led the procession of the Four-in-Hand Club—was obliged to confess that Hammersley’s ‘turn-out’ was a neat-looking thing.

The pace of the thoroughbreds, if left to themselves, was extremely fast, but this morning their owner did not choose to indulge them in their own way. He drove

them comparatively slowly along the road to St. Cloud—not an easy task to do either, for they had not been out for two days, and they pulled hard and steadily at the reins which their master held so firmly.

The fact was, he had come out that morning more to enjoy the drive and have a little undisturbed reflection than from any particular desire to view the beauties of St. Cloud afresh ; so he was in nowise disposed to let the chestnuts whirl him along at their own pace, and land him at his destination before he had got his ‘think’ well over.

So he drove them along slowly, the pace, however much they chafed at it, displaying their superb action to perfection, and provoking the encomiums of those passers-by who were sufficient judges of horseflesh to appreciate the pair stepping so proudly and statelily along.

I need scarcely say that the subject of their owner’s thoughts was—Edith Stewart. He had never really ceased to think of her since the day they parted. She had been so interwoven with his life that, even absent from him,

she seemed a part of his present being—a kind of undefined spirit hovering around him, and entering more or less into every thought of the past or future. But since he had known she was coming to Paris he had thought of her with greater intensity than ever, except, perhaps, in those first miserable days of their separation.

He was speculating, as he drove along to St. Cloud, as to the probable result of their meeting again. He was wondering whether the sight of him once more would recall the old love to her heart; and then—his face flushed here with the keen emotion of the thought—if it were so, should he prove eloquent enough to induce her to repair the wrong she had done him by inflicting a deeper on the man she called her husband.

He did not put it in these words to himself, he only characterised repairing her wrong to him as *leaving* her husband. In his eyes, the Earl of Ardross was the robber who had stolen his treasure from him, and, in taking it back, he deemed he was only recovering his own. He did not stop to inquire whether Ardross.

had ever known that he was taking what had belonged to another.

Hamnersley was not a good, nor, where his own feelings were concerned, a just man. His conscience was his law, his passions his impulse. He hated injustice in others. Had he lived in the time of Louis XVI., he would have sided with the people against the tyranny of the nobles. Had he been a patrician in the days of Rienzi, he would have been the first to lift his voice against the vices and crimes of his own order. But where he had his own injuries to redress, his own insults to avenge, he did not pause to stay his hand from the innocent in his passionate search after the guilty.

He could spare neither in hate nor love. The peace of a good man's household could be no obstacle where his sense of wrong was aroused. He would have scrupled at no sacrifice himself for the woman whom he sought without scruple to dishonour, but he would exact the sacrifice from her as well. Had he seduced Edith from her husband's hearth, it would seem but justice that Ardross should suffer as he had suffered.

I daresay many of my readers will here lay the book down in disgust, and designate these as the feelings of a heartless, selfish sensualist. I do not defend them ; but I entreat you to remember that few of us are just reasoners where the fiercest and strongest passions of our nature are so deeply interested as his were. We can see the beam in our brother’s eye readily enough, but the best of us have but a very dim inkling of the mote that is festering in our own.

Slowly as he had driven, the distance to St. Cloud seemed nothing as he drew up at the entrance to the park, and threw the reins down. So absorbed was he in his own thoughts that he scarcely noticed a small phæton, of the description usually driven by ladies, drawn by a splendid pair of ponies, and a diminutive groom, in perfect keeping with the equipage, standing at their head.

He lighted a cigar and strolled into the park. He had come, as I have said, not to view the palace again, but merely for something to do ; so he wandered on, indifferent

where he went so long as he managed to pass the time.

He turned at last down an avenue, at the far end of which was a seat. He could discern at the distance the figure of a woman, evidently its sole occupant. She had her back turned towards him, and all that he could tell at first was that it was too slight and fragile to be that of a woman much beyond her first youth. As he neared her he caught a slight glimpse of her profile. You can judge of his astonishment when he recognised in the solitary occupant of that seat the woman who had been engrossing his thoughts all the morning.

His first impulse was to go back. He had been revolving for a long time the manner in which he should meet her; but, now that she was so very near, he felt his courage fail him a little. The next moment, however, he became ashamed of his weakness, and, flinging away his cigar, advanced to where she was sitting.

She had her eyes cast down and turned from him, apparently in deep thought. She

must have heard his step upon the gravel, but probably did not think it worth while to look to whom it belonged, until she heard a voice exclaim clearly and distinctly—

‘Lady Ardross !’

It seemed ages since she had heard that voice, but she recognised it again in the first syllable it uttered. She rose hurriedly, her face first suffusing with a deep crimson, and then, turning deadly pale, she held out her hand mechanically.

‘Mr. Hammersley !’ she said, simply; but she could not keep her voice steady over these two words, and she could not meet the eyes that were looking at her searchingly.

He noted her embarrassment, and it increased his self-possession. He held her hand in his for a minute, and stooped slightly down to look into the eyes she held averted from his own.

‘My presence seems to have startled you,’ he said, in a low voice. ‘I must apologise for such a sudden interruption.’

‘You were certainly the last person I expected to meet here,’ she answered, with an

assumption of ease in her manner which seemed at strange variance with her emotion of the moment before.

‘ You do not believe in ghosts, then?’ he asked, gravely.

‘ Believe in ghosts !’ she repeated, her eyes still turned from his. ‘ I do not understand you.’

He laughed a low, short laugh, with a tinge of irony in it. ‘ Am I not a ghost of your past life?’ he asked—‘ a memory that occasionally haunts, although I know it does not trouble, you?’

She laughed, too, at this ; she was trying to rally herself.

‘ At any rate,’ she answered, ‘ you are not a very formidable “ bogie,” and I was never given to superstition.’

They stood silent for some time, till Edith resumed her seat, and said—

‘ Will you sit down a little while till my husband (she spoke that word with crimsoning cheek) returns? He has only gone for a little investigation round the park, and I should like to introduce you to him ; that

is to say, if you have no other engagement.’

‘I have no better engagement, thank you,’ he answered coolly, and sat down beside her.

‘Edith?’ he said gravely, ‘or must it be Lady Ardross?’ He paused here for an answer.

She looked up at him for the first time, and a trace of her old girlish vivacity seemed visible in her, as she answered quickly—

‘Edith, of course. It would be absurd for people brought up together as children to be as formal as strangers at a ball.’

‘Edith it shall be then,’ he said. ‘Well, the question I was going to ask you was this: It is most probable that we shall be continually crossing one another’s path in life till we die. The world of good society is so very limited that it would be almost impossible to escape. Shall we, under these circumstances, remain friends, or has your marriage made it necessary that we should meet as strangers?’

‘Certainly not,’ she answered. ‘We shall be friends, of course, and the best of friends,

I hope. My marriage can offer no possible obstacle.'

'The best of friends!' Perhaps the poor child believed it when she said it. She underrated the great gulf that separates friendship from love.

'So be it then,' he said. 'It is a bargain. Let us shake hands on it. Friends *may* shake hands, I suppose?'

She placed her small gloved hand in his without a word, and the very contact sent a thrill through his frame. Poor, deluded mortal! Yesterday he had believed himself cured of his love for Edith Stewart; to-day the tones of her voice, the pressure of her hand, woke passion once more in every fibre.

They sat silent for some seconds after that ratification of the compact, and then Hammersley said—

'I did not send you a letter of congratulation, because I was not sure whether, as soon as you recognised the handwriting, you would condescend to read it. Permit me to make up for my omission now.'

'Thank you,' she answered, simply, to her old lover.

‘You don’t seem to appreciate my politeness,’ he said, lightly, ‘if one may judge from your exceedingly brief acknowledgment. I think it a great sacrifice to ignore one’s feelings so gracefully as I have done. It is not a pleasant thing for a man to congratulate the woman he loved himself on her marriage with some one else. Do you fancy it is?’

She made no answer to that question.

‘Have you no idea of the truth of what I say, Edith?’ he asked again.

She was compelled to reply this time.

‘I don’t know,’ she said, hurriedly and rather nervously: ‘I was never placed in a similar position.’

Hammersley at this laughed rather good-humouredly.

‘You are a true woman, Edith,’ he said. ‘You will not criminate yourself, if you possibly can help it.’

She laughed slightly at this too; but there was a want of the true ring in her merriment. It seemed rather to proceed from a sense of obligation to contribute some share to the *tête-à-tête*. The forced effort to do so did not

escape the observation of her companion. He looked keenly at her as he said—

‘ You seem to have lost something of your old vivacity, Edith ? ’

She coloured ever so faintly at that remark. As a rule, her emotions did not find vent, like those of a dairymaid, in blushing, but perhaps she had reasons for the slight carnation that dyed her cheek then, reasons not unconnected with the man beside her.

‘ I *have* changed rather lately ; at least, so a good many people tell me,’ she answered, shyly. ‘ I expect,’ she added, in a more amused and careless manner, ‘ I thought it was time to settle down into a steady, respectable member of society.’

‘ Saul among the prophets,’ said her cousin, sarcastically. ‘ And how long, pray, has this change “ come o’er the spirit of your dream ? ” Is matrimony to answer for the metamorphosis ? ’

‘ Very likely,’ she answered, quietly. The difference in her old lover’s tone when he spoke of her marriage was too marked to escape her. He had cared enough for her to

resent it, that was evident, and I fancy her woman's vanity and her woman's heart derived a little gratification from this palpable fact. She had given him that quiet answer in order to further arouse his jealousy.

He accepted the bait. In the game which he had mapped out to himself to play with Edith Stewart he had resolved he would force her to show her hand first ; but they had scarcely been five minutes together ere the woman's superior *finesse* had exposed his.

‘Lord Ardross must be a person of singular powers of persuasion,’ he said, all the jealousy and bitterness at the past speaking in his voice. ‘Such a conversion is nothing short of a miracle. It is a pity we have not a few more missionaries with his ability among our fashionable women, to change them so readily from frivolous maidens into sober matrons.’

She had gone too far. The bitterness with which he spoke those words told her well enough how deeply he was pained ; and, out of very pity for that love which she had madly thrown away, she could not let him

think that another had had more influence over her than ever he possessed.

‘I think you are wrong in ascribing it altogether to Lord Ardross’s influence,’ she answered, softly. ‘Of course, when I married, I had resolved not to vex a husband in the same way as (the eyes were downcast again here, and the cheeks crimsoning slightly) I might have done a lover; but I fancy I was a little prepared to turn good on my own account, before I enjoyed the benefit of his assistance.’

That little admission might mean much or nothing; told, too, in such a hesitating way. To a sanguine lover it might have served as a peg on which to hang some hopes of success; to a doubting one, it left him almost as much in the dark as ever.

‘You have really turned good then?’ he asked, gravely.

‘Good to what I was, I think,’ she said, with a smile.

‘And what does the attainment of such perfection imply?’ he continued—‘renunciation of the errors of former ways, flirtation,

breaking the hearts of your own admirers, and turning those of the admirers of others from their allegiance? “These were thy gods, O Israel;” were they not?’

‘I am afraid so,’ she answered quietly. It was a pretty correct catalogue of the besetting sins of her maidenhood.

‘And you have really given up flirting?’ he asked incredulously.

‘Really and truly,’ she replied gravely: ‘I never flirt now.’

It was not the coquetry of a pretty woman, assuming a virtue to which she had no pretensions: truth spoke in her voice and in her eyes. Her lover paused a moment before he said—

‘It would have been much better if you had given it up long ago.’

‘Heaven knows, it *would* have been better!’ she answered, with a sudden energy and passion that startled her listener.

He scarcely knew how to interpret that sudden burst. Did it betray remorse for the folly which had cost them their parting, or was it the memory of that other victim lying

far off in his self-made grave, lured to his own undoing by her fatal beauty, which smote her conscience so sharply? Aye! could he have read Edith's heart at that moment, he would have known it was remorse for the living, not the dead lover, that had stirred her up to that bitter self-accusation.

'Repentance comes too late in your case; as, in fact, it usually does in everything,' he said, sternly. 'You preferred the short-lived folly. It had its bright side, doubtless, while it lasted. You can hardly complain because now you have the picture reversed. Remorse is the usual penalty that weakness pays for the unworthy things it sets its heart upon.'

Surely Edith *was* changed. She suffered him to upbraid her now without a word of protest, whereas in the old days it would have provoked a storm of indignation. But then it was only lately she had learned the 'unworthiness' of the things she had set her heart upon in comparison with a true man's love.

They had not much more time left to converse together, for in a few moments the

earl came up the avenue. He discovered one more added to the company he expected to find, but this fact did not discompose him in the least. He was one of those very rare specimens of humankind—a man who could love very deeply without being afflicted by that painful complaint, jealousy. This was, doubtless, more owing to his open, straightforward, and *bonhomme* temperament than to personal vanity, or to the most implicit confidence in his wife, undeniably great as the former, and completely trusting as the latter, were. Had he seen Edith surrounded by a hundred men, night after night, his equanimity would never have been disturbed in the slightest degree. Cæsar’s wife was above suspicion. There is no question but that such husbands are a great blessing.

Edith introduced Hammersley to her husband with a certain amount of shyness, which, however, was happily not noticed by Ardross, and only dimly surmised by her cousin. Her code of honour was purer than her lover’s, and she rather shrank in her own heart from assisting in such a mockery as friendship

between men who, had Ardross known all, must be rivals to the death.

The earl was very delighted to make the acquaintance of his wife's cousin. He was a good, genial soul, and would have been gratified to know anyone furnished with such good credentials as were afforded by Edith's recommendation ; and Hammersley murmured something expressive of pleasure too, not very distinctly though, for the words somewhat choked him. He could not feel charitably towards the man who enjoyed what he had hoped to win for himself once, who could kiss the lips on which a short time ago he had pledged his faith. Nor was it unnatural this feeling. We don't like to see a favourite dog or bird receiving from another the kindness we used to show to them ; and, certainly, a woman on whom we centred all our hopes of life and happiness is of more value than 'many sparrows.'

The earl began to talk of St. Cloud, and thence, by an easy divergence, passed to the affairs of France. He was of the same politics as Hammersley ; not so pronounced, certainly,

but still a good Liberal, with an ‘enlightened self-interest ;’ and on that topic he got on well with him. But his eloquence, I fear, was rather lost on his listener, for the one question that Hammersley kept repeating to himself, and trying to answer, was—‘ Does she, can she, love this man she calls her husband ? ’

He was a fine, stalwart figure, tolerably good-looking—such a man as many women would be proud to love. But he knew Edith’s romantic temperament. There was no romance about Ardross ; he could never have ascended to poetry in his loves or hates ; he was simple, plain, and straightforward ; and, therefore, it seemed strange to Hammersley, knowing his cousin so well, that she could love him.

Happily, such doubts did not disturb the mind of Lord Ardross. He fancied himself beloved, and that was enough. He was not one of those exacting lovers (I am afraid women like such the best though) who are perpetually gauging the affections of those they love. I don’t think he had once asked his wife if she cared deeply for him : he had

taken what she said when she accepted him as sufficient proof; and everything that had occurred since had only tended to confirm the favourable impression with which he commenced.

At length Hammersley thought it time to go. The earl and his wife intended to look over the palace, and he was in no humour to accompany them; so he offered his *adieu*.

The earl, however, was not going to let him off so easily.

‘I suppose,’ he said, laughingly, ‘the prospect of exploring the palace alarms you. Well, in that case, we will excuse you; but, if you have no better engagement, I must insist upon your dining with us this evening at our hotel, or, if not to-night, on the first opportunity.’

‘I have no better engagement,’ returned Hammersley, slowly—he had a little hesitation at thrusting his head so soon into the lion’s very den—‘but I can hardly accept it at once, for this reason: I have no wife to consult about my arrangements, but I have a friend,

and we are engaged to dine together to-night.’

Before the earl could reply, his wife anticipated him.

‘Mr. Saville is with you, is he not?’ she asked.

Her cousin bowed his head.

‘Then if he will come, bring him too. We shall be most happy to see him.’

‘By all means,’ added Lord Ardross. ‘I should be extremely glad to make Mr. Saville’s acquaintance. He is a man of whom I have heard a great deal; so pray induce him to accompany you.’

‘I don’t expect I shall have much difficulty,’ said Hammersley, with a smile. ‘A bachelor dinner of two is not so attractive. I can promise you to bring him.’

‘In that case *au revoir* till the evening.’ And the earl shook hands heartily with him, while Edith laid her hand for a second in his, as if she feared her husband would detect a deeper significance in her salutation to her cousin than she was willing to acknowledge to herself.

So Hammersley drove back from St. Cloud,

with a strange feeling almost akin to happiness upon him. The earl had tempted him to enter his house. Was he responsible now if affairs should turn out as he was not without a hope they should? Yet this frankness of Ardross troubled him a little. He would rather have met him as an open foe than as an unsuspecting friend, utterly ignorant of the causes of his rival's hate.





CHAPTER XVI.

‘HOW WILL IT END?’

HAMMERSLEY found his friend stretched at full length upon the sofa smoking a cigar, with all appearance of comfort and contentment on his features and in his attitude. He had just been concocting, or rather had just finished concocting, a somewhat lengthy chapter on the subject of peasant proprietors, and he was now reclining, after his great mental fatigue, and digesting his arguments with great inward satisfaction.

‘Well, old fellow!’ he exclaimed, in a genial tone, as Hammersley entered the apartment, ‘how have you enjoyed yourself? Did the chesnuts pull, as usual, like two young steam-engines?’ Saville had driven them once, and that solitary experience had been enough for

him. He had no notion of making an exertion of pleasure. 'When I drive,' he had remarked to their owner on returning, 'I like a pair of rational animals, who are wise enough to study their own and their master's interests by going at a reasonable pace, not a couple of fiery young devils who seem bent on pulling your arms out of their sockets.'

'Much the same,' answered Hammersley, carelessly; then, bursting with his news, he added, eagerly, 'Saville, I have had such an adventure since I saw you.'

His friend looked at him keenly.

'Well,' he said, slowly, 'I must say you look as if something out of the common had ruffled your serenity. To put it plainly, you appear excited.'

'Guess what it was?' interrogated the other.

Mr. Saville reflected; but, somehow, the peasant proprietors would mingle with his ideas, so his reflections were not much to the purpose.

'A petticoat is at the bottom of it, I suppose?' he said, sagaciously.

‘Right,’ nodded Hammersley; ‘it *has* to do with a petticoat.’

‘Then I give it up,’ answered Saville. ‘My brain has been exercised rather severely this morning, and my talent for guessing conundrums become impaired in consequence.’

Hammersley placed his elbows upon the table and leaned forward.

‘I have met a very old friend,’ he said, briefly.

‘A very old friend?’ repeated Saville. ‘I have it,’ he exclaimed, eagerly: ‘Edith, for a thousand pounds.’

Hammersley nodded his head in confirmation of his friend’s surmise.

‘Where did you meet her?’ questioned Saville.

‘In the park at St. Cloud,’ was the answer.

‘Why she only arrived in Paris yesterday. What was she doing there?’

‘Admiring the beauties of nature, I presume; at least, she seemed to be absorbed in a deep reverie about something or other when I came upon the scene.’

‘She was with her husband, of course?’ asked Saville.

‘Not at first. I walked promiscuously down one of the avenues and perceived a solitary figure sitting on a bench at the bottom. I did not pay much attention to it at first; but, on obtaining a nearer view, I found it was not so unfamiliar. You may guess my surprise when, on turning round, she disclosed the features of Edith Stewart that was, Lady Ardross that is.’

‘Well, and what were your proceedings when you recognised her?’

‘She rose hurriedly, and we shook hands. She seemed rather nervous and embarrassed at our sudden *rencontre*; but I talked a little on different matters, and then we sat down together and had some more conversation, till her husband came up. I was introduced to him, and he received me most cordially; for what possible reason I cannot conceive. The upshot of it was that, when I left them, he invited me to dinner, and afterwards you; and her ladyship warmly seconded the invitation.’

‘A very pretty little adventure,’ said Saville, when he had concluded his narration.
‘And what is Croesus like?’

‘From a first impression,’ answered Hammersley, thoughtfully, ‘I should say Croesus was a man of that extraordinarily genial nature which overflows upon everything and everybody around him. Heaven knows, he has not much reason to be polite to me.’

‘Perhaps he is not acquainted with certain passages in his wife’s past history,’ said Saville, with a smile.

‘Probably not. Edith was never very great at confessions, and perhaps she fancied such confidences might destroy her hopes of becoming Lady Ardross. Not that I fancy he is addicted to jealousy: he seems almost too good-natured to suspect anybody.’

‘Trusting being! Such guilelessness is most refreshing in the nineteenth century,’ said Saville, sarcastically. ‘But you have not told me much about her ladyship. How did she receive you? With open arms—I mean metaphorically, of course—or with a stately dignity, befitting a present wife and probable mother?’

‘To confess the truth, Saville,’ answered Hammersley, ‘that is more than I can tell myself. Edith is such an unaccountable being,

that I defy the devil himself to make her out. She was decidedly nervous and embarrassed—that was palpable enough ; but whether it was due to the mere suddenness of our meeting, or to some little remnant of affection and remorse still buried in a corner of her heart, I really cannot guess any better than you could.'

' She is not subject to embarrassment as a rule, I should say,' rejoined Saville, thoughtfully ; ' she has been too well trained for that. Fashionable etiquette does not permit the exhibition of vulgar emotion.'

' I really cannot tell,' repeated Hammersley, ' whether she loves me still or not, or, further, whether she cares for her husband. Ardross is the last kind of man I should have fancied Edith would choose, unless, of course, she merely married him for position. But, in the first place, I don't think she is mercenary enough to marry a man solely for social advantages ; and, secondly, she must have had chances of men in as good, if not higher, position than Ardross, though not so wealthy perhaps.'

' I am afraid it is a riddle I can't solve, seeing I know so little of the lady's real

character or feelings,’ said Saville, drily. ‘But I want to know about you : Has the sight of her set fire to the little flame again, or has Lady Ardross cured you of Edith Stewart ?’

Hammersley looked down a moment, as if ashamed of his weakness. Then he answered, slowly :

‘ I may as well tell the truth now as later on. I thought yesterday I was cured. I knew I could never love another as I had loved her, but I thought my love would be buried with her girlhood—that it could not be revived in the wife. When I saw her again to-day—when I took her hand in mine and looked in her eyes again—I found my mistake. I knew that I loved her as madly as ever, if not more so, for the very reason that the barrier between us seemed greater. I knew once more that Edith Stewart—I cannot call her by that other cursed name—was born to be my bane through life.’

He buried his face between his hands, in the abject despair of a man who knows and curses his own weakness, yet cannot conquer it. Yesterday he had seemed so strong in his

armour of fancied indifference ; to-day he felt so utterly powerless with the hurt that a woman's bright eyes and a woman's low voice had dealt to his peace.

' I am sorry, deeply sorry, for this meeting,' said Saville, gravely. ' Had I thought there still dwelt such fire in the old embers, I would have counselled you to put miles and miles between yourself and her. Far better that it should be so. You love her madly, and even were she to requite your passion a thousand-fold, what remains but a deeper misery for your sundered lives ? Her marriage has created a gulf, over which neither can pass. You are more divided now, though you stood side by side, than if mountains and seas rose between you.'

' She may yet repair the wrong she has done me,' said Hammersley, in a low voice. ' Marriage bonds can be broken ! '

' *What !*' exclaimed Saville, in a voice, the sternness of which rather startled his listener, prepared as he was for an outburst at that intimation. ' Is it possible that I can understand you ? Do you hint at the possibility of Edith's bringing dishonour on her husband ?

Is your cruel love to be satisfied with nothing short of such sacrifices as her fair fame and his peace? Is this the love you pretend—a love that would take advantage of her weakness to make her play the harlot? I blush for you, man—that you, an English gentleman, should stand here calmly plotting the destruction of a woman’s soul to gratify your selfish lust! ’

‘ You only see *one* side of the question,’ answered Hammersley, bitterly. ‘ You pity *him*—you only think of *his* sufferings. Give a thought now to mine. What do you think I have felt since I knew that my hopes and heart were alike blighted? Do you fancy I have a shred of compassion for the man who has come between us; whose every caress is laid upon lips at whose bidding I would lay down my life; whose hand clasps that which I would peril damnation itself to win? Had I not the first right to her? Was she not mine by a compact more holy and binding than the hollow mockery which a hired priest mumbled over their heads? I tell you,’ he cried, passionately, ‘ *he* is the adulterer, not I. I only seek to take back what he has robbed me of.’

He spoke with the intense, burning passion that had been slumbering and smouldering within his breast for the long, weary months he had been debarred a sight of her face.

‘I don’t understand your code of morals,’ answered Saville, coldly. ‘You are heated now, and probably exaggerate both what you feel and wish ; but what I inferred just now I will repeat in plainer terms. If you go to that man’s house, sit at his table, look in his face, take his hand, while you are calmly and deliberately plotting his wife’s dishonour, I tell you you are an unprincipled, selfish scoundrel, and a man from whom every honest fellow-creature would shrink with loathing and disgust.’

He spoke this last sentence sternly, with rather a tinge of passion in his sternness, for he hated injustice, whether social or political ; and this seemed to him a foul wrong.

At the end of his speech, Hammersley burst out into a laugh. So incongruous did it seem in contrast to his emotion of the moment before, that Saville was almost inclined to charitably ascribe his objectionable morality to brief mental derangement.

‘My dear fellow,’ he said, lightly, ‘pray don’t get upon stilts about the unfortunate Lord Ardross. I have no doubt he is the happiest of men, and his wife the most immaculate of countesses. I don’t expect for a moment that our relations will ever cause any scandal, or lose me the friendship and esteem of such a highly moral gentleman as yourself. I like to go into heroics occasionally before you, for it really is a charming spectacle to see you in such virtuous indignation as you displayed just now.’

‘You may be mad, or you may not,’ answered Saville, scarcely mollified by this last speech. ‘In my own opinion, your conversation for the last ten minutes has had a strong flavour of Bedlam and strait-waist-coats; but I know this for certain: your meeting with Edith this morning cannot, considering your feelings towards her, result in much good, and may be productive of considerable harm, if not positive sin. I should be glad now to be able to give a guess as to how it will end.’

‘True,’ said Hammersley, getting up and

walking to the mantelpiece, from whence he surveyed his friend with rather an amused expression. ‘That is the problem, is it not? Given a married woman and a single man, *the former of whom* did love once, and the latter loves still; given, moreover, abundant opportunities of meeting again—how will it end? I am afraid we can’t say D. E. F. to it yet; but suppose we set about the first step towards its elimination by dining together to-night at Lord Ardross’s?’

‘I will go with you,’ answered Saville, spitefully, ‘if it is only to see how you behave yourself, and, if necessary, to give his lordship a hint in time?’

‘Don’t trouble yourself, my dear boy,’ said Hammersley, easily; ‘the normal temperature of Edith’s passions is about ten degrees below freezing point. It is only on rare occasions they get up to summer heat, and they will have to be considerably above that before she shocks the world in general, and you in particular, by eloping with her old lover.’

[MARCH, 1873.

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(From *THE SATURDAY REVIEW*.)

Generally speaking, in criticising a novel we confine our observations to the merits of the author. In this case we must make an exception, and say something as to the publisher. The *Mistress of Langdale Hall* does not come before us in the stereotyped three-volume shape, with rambling type, ample margins, and nominally a guinea and a half to pay. On the contrary, this new aspirant to public admiration appears in the modest guise of a single graceful volume, and we confess that we are disposed to give a kindly welcome to the author, because we may flatter ourselves that she is in some measure a *protégée* of our own. A few weeks ago an article appeared in our columns censuring the prevailing fashion of publishing novels at nominal and fancy prices. Necessarily, we dealt a good deal in commonplaces, the absurdity of the fashion being so obvious. We explained, what is well known to every one interested in the matter, that the regulation price is purely illusory. The publisher in reality has to drive his own bargain with the libraries, who naturally beat him down. The author suffers, the trade suffers, and the libraries do not gain. Arguing that a palpable absurdity must be exploded some day unless all the world is qualified for Bedlam, we

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felt ourselves on tolerably safe ground when we ventured to predict an approaching revolution. Judging from the preface to this book, we may conjecture that it was partly on our hint that Mr. Tinsley has published. As all prophets must welcome events that tend to the speedy accomplishment of their predictions, we confess ourselves gratified by the promptitude with which Mr. Tinsley has acted, and we heartily wish his venture success. He recognises that a reformation so radical must be a work of time, and at first may possibly seem to defeat its object. For it is plain that the public must first be converted to a proper regard for its own interests ; and, by changing the borrowing for the buying system, must come in to bear the publisher out. He must look, moreover, to the support and imitation of his brethren of the trade. We doubt not he has made the venture after all due deliberation, and that we may rely on his determination seconding his enterprise. All prospectuses of new undertakings tend naturally to exaggeration, but success will be well worth the waiting for, should it be only the shadow of that on which Mr. Tinsley reckons. He gives some surprising figures ; he states some startling facts ; and, as a practical man, he draws some practical conclusions. He quotes a statement of Mr. Charles Reade's, to the effect that three publishers in the United States had disposed of no less than 370,000 copies of Mr. Reade's latest novel. He estimates that the profits on that sale—the book being published at a dollar—must amount to £25,000. Mr. Reade, of course, has a name, and we can conceive that his faults and blemishes may positively recommend themselves to American taste. But Mr. Tinsley remarks that if a publisher could sell 70,000 copies in any case, there would still be £5,000 of clear gain ; and, even if the new system had a much more moderate success than that, all parties would still profit amazingly. For Mr. Tinsley calculates the profits of a sale of 2,000 copies of a three-volume edition at £1,000, and we should fancy the experience of most authors would lead them to believe he overstates it. It will be seen that at all events the new speculation promises brilliantly, and reason and common sense conspire to tell us that the reward must come to him who has patience to wait. *Palmam qui meruit ferat*, and may he have his share of the profits too. Meanwhile, here we have the first volume of Mr. Tinsley's new series in most legible type, in portable form, and with a sufficiently attractive exterior. The price is four shillings, and, the customary trade deduction being made to circulating libraries, it leaves them without excuse should they deny it to the order of their customers.

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